ASIAN WRITERS SERIES

6/2017
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WATER

ASHOKAMITRAN

SHOUT
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IT

ASHOKAMITRAN was born in Secunderabad, Andhra Pradesh, in 1931, and did his B.Sc. in maths, physics and chemistry from Nizams College, Hyderabad.

His literary career began with the prize-winning radio play *Anbin parisu* (1954). This was to be followed by many short stories, essays and seven novels: *Karainda Nizhalgal* (Dissolving Shadows 1969), *Tannir* (Water 1971), *18-aavadu Atchakodu* (18th Parallel 1977), *Indru* (Today 1984), *Ottran* (Spy 1985), *Manasarovar* (1989), *Vizha Maalai Podil* (The Evening of the Festival 1991) and also a collection of novellas, *Viduthalai* (1979). Many of his short stories have appeared in recent anthologies of Indian fiction, in his own English translation, and *18th Parallel* has recently appeared in English (published by Orient Longman 1993). His short stories have also been translated into French, Russian and Hungarian.

Ashokamitran has won many awards for his short stories and novels, including the Ilakkia Chintaani Award (Madras) and the All-India Short Story Prize of the *Illustrated Weekly of India* in 1971. He was invited to join the University of Iowa's International Writing Programme in 1973–4. For twenty-three years he has been Executive Editor of the influential Tamil literary journal *Kanaiyazhi*.

A man of wide-ranging interests, particularly in history and classical Hindustani music, Ashokamitran lives in Madras and has three sons.

LAKSHMI HOLMSTRÖM is a freelance writer and translator, who studied at Madras and Oxford. She is the author of *Indian Fiction in English: the Novels of R. K. Narayan* (1973) and editor of *The Inner Courtyard: Short Stories by Indian Women* (1990). She has translated many short stories by contemporary Tamil writers, including *A Purple Sea* (1991), a collection of short stories by Ambai. She is working currently on a re-telling of the Tamil Buddhist narrative poem *Manimekalai*.

ASHOKAMITRAN

WATER
(TANNIR)

Translated from the Tamil by
Lakshmi Holmström

HEINEMANN

Heinemann Educational
A Division of Heinemann Publishers (Oxford) Ltd
Halley Court, Jordan Hill, Oxford OX2 8EJ

Heinemann: A Division of Reed Publishing (USA) Inc.
361 Hanover Street, Portsmouth, NH 03801–3912, USA

Heinemann Educational Books (Nigeria) Ltd
PMB 5205, Ibadan
Heinemann Educational Boleswa
PO Box 10103, Village Post Office, Gaborone, Botswana

FLORENCE PRAGUE PARIS MADRID
ATHENS MELBOURNE JOHANNESBURG
AUCKLAND SINGAPORE TOKYO
CHICAGO SAO PAULO

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First published by Heinemann Educational in 1993

Series Editor: Ranjana Sidhanta Ash

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Cover design by Touchpaper
Cover illustration by Matthew Cooper

ISBN 0435 95085 1

Phototypeset by Wilmaset Ltd, Birkenhead, Wirral
Printed and bound in Great Britain
by Cox & Wyman Ltd, Reading, Berkshire

93 94 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Introduction to the Asian Writers Series

Heinemann's new Asian Writers Series, aided by the Arts Council of Great Britain, intends to introduce English language readers to some of the interesting fiction written in languages that most will neither know nor study.

For too long popular acclaim for Asian writing in the West has been confined to the handful of authors who choose to write in English rather than in the language of their own cultures. Heinemann's entry into the field should dispel this narrow perspective and place modern Asian writing within the broad spectrum of contemporary world literature.

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These first six titles face the normal problems affecting literature in translation, not least the difficulty of establishing an exact parallel of the thought or verbal utterance of the original in the target language. When the source text is in a non-European language and embodies a culture and literary style quite alien to English language readers, the translator's task is made even more difficult.

Susan Bassnett in her invaluable work on translation studies describes the typical colonial attitude to the literature of the

colonised as a 'master and servant' relationship, with the European translator attempting to 'improve' and 'civilise' the source text. At the other end of the scale she describes a kind of 'cannibalism' in which the translator almost 'devours' the text to disgorge a totally new product. Fortunately, the translators of this series fall into neither category but manage to retain a balanced view of their craft.

While it is very important to produce a translation that uses a style both readable and engaging to an English language readership, it must not obscure the particularities of literary devices, figures of speech, and aesthetic detail that the author uses to convey his or her sensibility, imagination and verbal artistry. Should such faithfulness to the original produce in the English version a greater degree of sentiment or charged imagery than the reader might expect, one hopes that he or she will be ready to accept the novelty of writing from an unfamiliar source.

In publishing the Asian Writers Series, Heinemann is taking a bold step into an area which has been neglected for too long. It is our hope that readers will respond with interest and enthusiasm as they discover the outstanding quality of these novels.

RANJANA SIDHANTA ASH, SERIES EDITOR, 1993

Introduction to Water

The first novel to be published in Tamil was *Pratapa Mudaliar Charitram*, the Story of Pratapa Mudaliar, by Vedanayakam Pillai. This was in 1879. A mixture of romance, realism and moral essay, it was, nevertheless, precursor of a number of early novels, the best known of which are *Kamalambal Charitram* by B. R. Rajam Aiyar, published in 1896, and *Padmavati Charitram* by A. Madhavaiah, published in 1898. These works are sometimes described as being part of a Tamil renaissance. Clearly they are motivated by social reformist ideals, and inspired by the staking out of national and regional identity. At the same time, their linguistic innovation is perhaps the most important aspect of these modern novels, hammering out as they do, a contemporary prose style which breaks out of a classical mould to include colloquial and spoken registers.

A second Tamil renaissance was given focus by the literary journal, *Manikkodi* (Jewelled Banner). This began in 1933 as a political, nationalist magazine, following hard upon the Civil Disobedience Movement of the time. It was inspired by Gandhi on the one hand, and by the contemporary Tamil poet, Subramanya Bharati, on the other. By the second half of the decade, under the editorship of B. S. Ramaiah, its emphasis became more and more literary. It brought together a number of brilliant short story writers, the best known of whom are perhaps Mowni and Pudumaipittan. Many of these writers continued to be influential well into the 1950s and 1960s. *Manikkodi* also was the vehicle of the earliest modern literary criticism in the language; it created a literary climate which made possible the exploration of literary art

forms, and connected, in this way, Tamil Nadu with the world of twentieth-century art.

Although *Manikkodi* ended in 1938, other literary journals such as *Ezhuttu*, *Kachadathapara*, *Kanaiyazhi* and *Pragnyai*, and small publishing firms such as *CRE-A*, have continued to foster literary talent and to give space to experimentation. At the same time, there have also existed a great number of more popular journals such as *Ananda Vikatan*, whose editor, Kalki, wrote and serialised widely-read romances such as *Sivakamiyin Sabadam* (Sivakami's Oath 1946).

If the early modern period of Tamil Literature is characterised by the novels of Rajam Aiyar and Madhavaiah, the period following that, from 1914 to 1947, seems to be dominated by the short story. And indeed the short story continues to be the favourite form of many contemporary Tamil writers. However, the Tamil novel has developed alongside it, and has been much influenced in its development by other forms such as the film-script with its attention to single 'frames' and the juxtaposition of scenes, and often too, by the constraints of the magazine serial. Si Su Chellappa, Jayakantan, T. Janakiraman and Sundara Ramaswamy are some of the major Tamil novelists of the 1960s and onwards.

Ashokamitran, one of the best known of contemporary Tamil writers, was born in Andhra Pradesh in 1931. His publications include several collections of short stories, a collection of novellas, and eight novels. His work stands apart from much contemporary writing, partly because of its experimentation with form, and partly also because of his bare and understated style.

Ashokamitran has always insisted that he wrote *Water* or *Tannir* as a long short story. It was first serialised in *Kanaiyazhi* from July to November 1971 and was published in its present form in 1973. In one sense, *Tannir* is a social documentary, describing the months of drought in Madras in 1969. The corporate street life that it describes is itself the protagonist, struggling to survive. Ashokamitran finds a new form for the novel, made up of many vignettes of unnamed characters, whose lives are all interlaced. Against this, he places the individual lives of the two sisters,

Jamuna and Chaya. Ashokamitran has said that he began writing the novel with only the picture in his mind of a girl who was always to be seen carrying a huge water pot, whether it was at two in the morning, or at the heat of the day at high noon. But the charting of the drought months, as the story progresses, is parallelled by the turning points in the girls' lives.

Many critics have pointed out the symbolic resonances in this novel, which take off from the extreme topicality of the drought in Madras. It may be important to point out that one of the ironies that is very tightly woven into the novel is the notion of *madi* or ritual purity, rigidly maintained by some orthodox people even throughout the drought. The early morning bath is as much for ritual purity as for cleanliness, and drinking water must be collected in that state. If this 'pure' water, or a ritually 'clean' person, be so much as touched by the 'impure', they become instantly polluted; the water, consequently, is useless. In the novel, the poignancy of this concept is set against the struggles of Chaya, Teacher-Amma and Jamuna to define themselves by other means than that of caste and ritual purity. The struggles of these particular characters is also contrasted with the various dubious political and economic transactions that are going on between the anonymous members of the street and the City Corporation.

It could be said that this novella risks carrying too great a weight of meanings. But in Tamil at least, Ashokamitran's bareness and clarity of style enables that play of meanings and leaves us with many questions about contemporary urban life in India. At the same time there is about it a sharpness, even an astringency, that mirrors very particularly the street life of Madras.

LAKSHMI HOLMSTRÖM, 1993

As soon as she detected a slight difference in the sound of the water pump, Jamuna who had been lying in bed for the past half hour listening to the owners of that house working their pump, instantly shook herself awake. Switching on the light to the room, she lifted up the two brass water pots that were standing ready and ran downstairs.

Water pumps were working away in all the houses of the neighbourhood. In all those streets, in this one and the next, and the one next to that, in each one of the houses there, you could hear very clearly at that early morning hour, the noises that were unique to its own water pump, separately and in unison. The lights were on in only a few houses. Even in the dim light that was shed by a single lamp Jamuna could see distinctly the landlady, her two daughters and son, all of them standing around the pump. They didn't so much as glance in her direction when she went up and joined them. The water, having indicated by its change of tone that it was just about to come through had now changed its mind. They were working the pump in turn, as if driven by a kind of frenzy to drag the water back. Then it gushed out in a sudden explosion. The landlady had already kept in place a wide-mouthed vessel so that no drop should be spilt or lost. As soon as the vessel was half full, she seized it with her two hands, gave it a swirl and poured it into another pot. Then she replaced the vessel under the pump. She took the water that had been collected so far into the light and scrutinized it. It was indeed dirty water, filled with bits of rust. Even so, she didn't throw it away.

Now the water was flowing freely without any holding back.

The owners of the house had filled one brass pot and were busy pumping up enough for a second. All the tenants had arrived by now and were standing there with two or three pots per person. Jamuna stood as close to the pump as she could manage. One woman, a tenant, had contrived within this time to have a bath in goodness knows what water and had come there with her hair bound in a wet towel, and a sari that was not worn properly but merely wrapped about her. She said to Jamuna, 'Why are you pushing up so close? Can't you stand some distance off?' Jamuna stepped aside very slightly.

The owners were now working the pump for their third pot. The wet-clothes woman said, 'After this, please let me have a turn. I'll just take a very small potful and go away while I'm still in *madi*, ritually clean.' The owners kept on at the pump without making a reply. Jamuna muttered loudly, 'Isn't it obvious that all of us were here ahead of you?'

The wet-clothes woman said, 'It's all right for you. If you don't get water here, you can run around to two or three different places. Can an old woman like me do that?'

The landlady's son replied curtly, 'There are ten of us in the family, all needing baths and drinking water. Just stand aside please.'

Another tenant put in, 'All of us have to have baths too, where are we to go if you pump all the water from the tap for yourselves?'

The landlady declared, 'But you people use up the water from the well and empty it completely without even waiting for dawn to break. Is it possible for us to compete with you there?'

One tenant said, 'I've been trying to tell you for the past week. If you remove the pulley and rope as soon as it gets dark, then you yourselves could ration the water from the well, say two buckets of water each in the morning. You just refuse to do that. Then of course we have to push and shove at each other every day.'

As soon as the landlord's family's third vessel was full, Jamuna pushed her way forward and placed her water pot under the pump. The wet-clothes woman jammed her vessel right against it. Jamuna said firmly, 'Move it aside, maami', and, pushing it a little

further off, began to work the pump. The wet-clothes woman said, 'Yes, keep pumping it for yourself, *sani*, inauspicious thing.'

'Who are you calling a sani? You must be the sani. Watch the words you are dropping so freely,' said Jamuna. Her heart was beating fast. The water was now gushing out like foam. All those who were gathered around cried, 'Harder. Keep pumping. Harder, harder.' It had begun to foam like this on the previous day only after they had filled ten pots. Jamuna seized the pump with both hands and moved it up and down with her entire strength. But the water was finished. It had stopped completely. Without any further word, either conversation or quarrel, they all took up their vessels and ran towards the house at the end of the street.

* * *

'No water today either?' asked Chaya, as she applied her lipstick. Without replying to her, Jamuna set down her empty water pots and then lifted the lid of the tall water drum to look inside. 'I only took about two tumblers full,' said Chaya immediately, 'No need to get worried.'

Jamuna remarked, 'If we don't empty this today it will start to smell and might even begin to breed maggots.'

'I haven't had a bath today either. I have to cover up with eau-de-Cologne. If there is no water here tomorrow, I must somehow manage in the office bathrooms.'

'You can at least have a bath in your office buildings. Where can I go?'

Chaya gazed at Jamuna with her wide eyes as she lifted up her hair with both hands and twisted it. Then, 'You could go to Grandmother's house for a bath,' she said.

'I will never step into that house,' said Jamuna. 'Paati is sure to shout at me and demand that I take mother away.'

'Poor thing, Amma,' said Chaya.

'If you feel like that why don't you take her away yourself and look after her,' asked Jamuna.

'As soon as I set up a household of my own, I'll certainly take

Amma away there. And if Amma is at home all the time, I could have Murali as well.'

'I have never said that I would not look after Murali for you even now, in this flat. That child could never be a trouble to me.'

Chaya gave a deep sigh but did not reply. 'Will you make the tea now?' she asked.

The small copper pot of drinking water was half full. Jamuna lit the stove and set two tumblerfuls of water to boil in an aluminium saucepan. Chaya having smartened herself, now took out a box from the cloth bag that was hanging from a nail on the wall. It contained the shop bread they had bought the previous day. 'Aren't you going to help yourself too?' she asked. Jamuna brought the jar of *avakkai* mango pickle from the *almirah*. This also had been bought. She too helped herself to a couple of slices of bread and spread some of the pickle on one.

As Chaya finished eating her bread, she said, 'When you send me my lunch, remember to put in a small packet of sugar. The coffee in our canteen never seems to be sweetened.'

'Very well,' said Jamuna. And she added, 'I must get started on the cooking now.'

'Have you got enough water to cook with at least?' asked Chaya.

Jamuna tilted the copper pot and looked inside, then grimaced.

'Then what are you going to do?' asked Chaya again.

'I shall have to go to the house at the end of the street. I haven't tried there so far. Otherwise, I shall have to beg a little water, just two small *chembus* worth, from the landlady.'

'How does it happen that there is water in just that one last house?'

'They say there's a little water flowing out there, somehow. I'll definitely have to go there after you have left for your office.'

'I'll wait and see for another four days. If at the end of that time we are still kept hanging about for water like this, I shall just have to go in to the Reddy Hostel.'

Jamuna did not reply. There was no place at that hostel for women who were not employed. She sprinkled two spoonfuls of tea leaves into the boiling water and took the saucepan off the fire. Then she blew at the stove and put it out. Immediately the

kerosene smoke rose up in a cloud. 'Yes, you go off to your hostel. Leave me to graze about the town.'

'Whoever asked you to graze about the town? How many times have I told you to go to Guntur and finish off your Matric examinations! Instead you ran after this Bhaskar Rao thinking he would turn you into a famous cinema heroine. How could you trust a married man and go with him? It's only because she keeps saying all this to you that you refuse to go to Grandmother's house.'

'I didn't know he was married.'

'Can't you see it in his face, as clearly as if a label had been stuck there?'

'Your life isn't all that great, you know.'

'Whatever it is, Murali has a father he can claim as such. There has been a marriage between us. And we will keep house together when he chooses to release himself from the army, or if he is posted to Madras.'

Chaya finished her tea and left for her office at a quarter past seven. Jamuna locked the door of their room and started out, carrying her water pot. It struck her that if the heels of Chaya's sandals were even slightly lower there would not be such hauteur in the way she walked.

* * *

The plump teacher, prominent as a gem among the women clustering about the pump at the house at the end of the street, saw Jamuna and hailed her. 'Welcome my dear, welcome. My eyes have grown glazed from looking out for you and not seeing you here yet.' Jamuna felt shy. 'Put your water pot at the end of this row and stand in procession here like the rest of us.'

The landlady was sitting on a stool at the doorway of the house. She now said, 'Look here, Teacher-Amma. You must promise to lock up the pump and give me the key at eight o'clock sharp. If I waste time like this, who is going to boil the rice and feed my children?'

'Why should you hang about here? If you want another couple

of buckets of water, I'll have it pumped up and delivered to you. You go inside now and do your cooking. And while you're about it, you can give us all a taste of the food,' the teacher said. Everyone standing there laughed. The landlady climbed down the front steps and gave the teacher's cheek a tweak. The teacher gave the other woman a great hug. Then she said. 'Mm. Mm. Next, next. Hey little one, are you lost in dreams of Junior next door? Come on, move up your cauldron or whatever huge thing you've got there.'

The landlady disappeared indoors. The teacher asked Jamuna, 'The young woman who shares your flat, is she your elder sister or younger sister?'

'My younger sister,' said Jamuna.

'She has terrific style,' commented the teacher.

Jamuna didn't say anything. The teacher went on, 'By the way, I know your Bhaskaran really well.' Jamuna felt her entire face darken. The teacher, taking no notice of this said, 'He is my mother's elder sister's son. We studied together up to the third form. After that he travelled here and there and finally entered the cinema world. And I ended up back in school.'

Just then a corporation lorry rattled along noisily. It stopped in front of a house just about halfway along the street. Not only the women standing by the pump, but men and women from all the houses thereabouts craned their necks to see. The lorry contained four forty-gallon barrel shaped drums and a large water tank. The drums were to be placed like four pillars which would hold up the water tank.

The teacher did not let her attention wander away from the pump. 'If I say one vessel, I mean just that,' she said. And as soon as Jamuna had filled her water pot, she twisted the heavy chain about the pump and called out, 'Hey, Landlady Amma, where is your lock?' There were five or six people who had stood behind Jamuna, all of whom now began to plead. 'Just let me take a small potful.' 'I only want a single bucketful.' But the teacher insisted, 'It can't be done. She made me promise I'll be responsible for stopping at eight. How often can they be replacing the washer and

the nut and other bits and pieces? Not possible. No, absolutely not.' She clamped on the lock that a small boy brought her.

Someone said, 'Who is she to act the class monitor? Does she think she is related to the owners or what?' The teacher said, 'Don't be cross with me, Uncle. Ask the landlady for yourself.' But there was no sign of the landlady. The man who complained hesitated to barge his way inside the house. The teacher, on the other hand, went inside to hand over the keys. The man who complained left. The teacher looked at Jamuna and said, 'Why are you still waiting here?' Then, before Jamuna could open her mouth she understood what was the matter and helped to lift the heavy water pot and place it firmly against Jamuna's hip. 'Wait, I'm coming too,' she said, and lifting her own water pot, began to walk along.

'Does your school begin at ten o'clock?' asked Jamuna.

'Nine forty-five. After this I have to cook the rice and serve the members of my family, then grab a couple of handfuls for myself before I leave for school. This water business has become a terrible struggle.'

Jamuna walked by her side without replying.

The four workmen were shouting together as they lifted and shoved the water tank, struggling to get it in place.

* * *

'Tell me, friend, when will they actually fill this thing up with water?' a man asked the lorry driver. It was in front of his house, between it and the edge of the street, that the workmen were setting up the water tank. Five or six of the older men who belonged to that street were circling round and round the tank. Lighting up a *bidi*, the lorry driver said, 'After all, we've only just set up the tank today. After the top is fixed on, they'll fill it up.'

'Oh, have they not fixed on the top yet?' asked another man. It was also then that they all happened to notice that there were empty holes, blocked up at the moment, where there ought to be taps from the tank.

The driver didn't answer immediately. One of the men who

lived on the street said, by way of calming the others down, 'If they had fixed the taps straightaway, it might have been difficult for them to lower the tank or to move it.'

The driver said to his men, 'Finish it smartly and move, you fellows. Why do you have to be so finicky in arranging the thing? How long does it have to take to shove the tank in place?'

One of the workmen spoke for the rest. 'It's all right for you just to stand there and watch. We've got to get it level, haven't we, before setting it down? It's all up and down here. We've got to put bricks under each of the drums.'

The driver said to the men of the neighbourhood, 'Look sirs, can't you at least find some bricks for us? It's for your sakes that these men are struggling so hard.'

One man went off saying, 'Wait, I can get some for you.'

A workman who was arranging the drums in place said, 'It's filthy everywhere on the ground. Can't put your foot down safely.'

'Must be some child,' said a bystander.

The lorry driver was contemptuous. 'If even you educated people behave like this, what can we expect from the rest? There are two or three flush out lavatories to each house in these parts, why can't they get the children to use them?'

Only one of the neighbours said quietly, 'If the children use the toilets as well, how will there be enough water in the septic tanks?'

The bricks had been brought and placed so that the four drums were now of equal height. One side of the lorry was dropped down and then the driver moved his vehicle back and forth a little until the tank was exactly adjacent to the drums. After that the workmen began to push the tank from the lorry. Using long poles, they levered up the tank and then slid it out so that one edge of it was pressing down on two of the drums. Two of the men held on to the drums, keeping them steady. The tank was pushed out still further. For one instant it had slid out of the lorry entirely and was most precariously perched on two drums alone. Then they at once moved the second row of drums forward and slid the tank over all four. Now the tank stood firmly balanced on all four drums. Within the next ten minutes the workmen had completed all the necessary fine adjustments. The driver took the signature of the

man who owned the house next to the tank. But he continued to stand there for a while.

'What is it?' the house owner asked.

'There are five of us here,' he said.

'Yes. What of it?'

'We have to position another nineteen tanks in this division. I took the trouble to bring your tank first, and to make sure that it would be in place this very day,' the lorry driver said pointedly.

The houseowner came out and announced to the five or six neighbours who were standing in front of the tank, 'You will each have to contribute half a rupee. This man says we have to give him something for having brought the tank and positioned it.'

'That's outrageous. Has he brought his tank here of his own accord? How many times did we bang our heads at the doors of the overseer and the engineer? How many times did we complain to the commissioner? It's only then that they bothered to bring us this tank,' one man said.

The houseowner, unwilling to get involved in a long drawn-out argument was curt. 'For the time being I'll give him something myself and send him off. But you'll have to return me my money by asking everyone who lives along this street to contribute.'

Another man added, 'Do you think it's going to end here? Now we'll have to pay tribute on each day that these fellows actually deliver water.'

The woman who lived in the end house walked by slowly, staring fixedly at the tank.

Jamuna was coming in the opposite direction, having more or less finished her cooking, intent on buying a lemon. She saw the landlady from the house at the end of the street, and moved aside a little, smiling deferentially. One of the men standing by the tank said to the end-house woman, 'Nothing here for you people; go on.'

The woman smiled and asked pointedly, 'Have they filled it with water already?'

'You refuse to give us water. But the corporation men, out of the generosity of their hearts, have somehow managed to bring us this tank.'

The woman passed the tank and went on. Jamuna fixed on

someone who looked as if he might reply to her and asked, 'When are they going to deliver water, *maama*?'

Instantly, they all looked startled. Someone asked, 'And who are you?'

'I belong to this street, maama. I live upstairs, in number sixteen'. It seemed to Jamuna herself that she was over-doing the 'maama', addressing everyone as uncle. It struck her that whenever she spoke in Tamil, she never achieved a tone of kinship and belonging, but somehow managed to sound impertinent instead. 'Let them deliver the water first. Come and see what happens afterwards,' someone said. Jamuna walked on, having lost her initial enthusiasm. Just a few words had been exchanged. They were not even people to whom she had been introduced. She wondered how it was that even so, they could evaluate her immediately as someone who was inferior to them by a single degree, and therefore brush her aside.

When she came up to the house, her landlady was arguing about wages with the men who had come to lower weights into the well.

* * *

The landlady and the labourers she had employed were standing there, blocking the gate, preventing Jamuna from going inside. This time the landlady's skills in disputation were not bringing her any rewards. She was forced into agreeing to pay ten rupees for each of the rings that were to be lowered into the well. They had agreed to put down four such rings. In former days, the price had never risen above five rupees per ring. Now each one cost all of ten rupees. She would have to spend eighty rupees in all.

'But will you manage to raise the water at least to a height of four feet?' she asked.

'Madam, we'll put down the rings first, and then dig down with crow-bars. Of course we'll do our best to see whether we can revive the water-source. But in the end it depends on your luck.'

'Does even that have to depend on one's luck?' asked the landlord, emerging from the house.

The landlady turned around to look at her husband.

'Let me go inside,' said Jamuna, coming past the gate. The owner of that house was possibly over sixty years old. But as she walked past him, and his eyes glanced over her, Jamuna was aware of her whole body shrinking with distaste. The landlady must have noticed. 'Jamuna,' she called.

Jamuna stopped at once and turned around.

Instead of speaking to her, the landlady first addressed her husband. 'How many of us need get involved in bargaining over this trivial affair? Please go inside.'

He understood and went inside, without saying a word.

The landlady said to Jamuna, 'It's because you people got together and pestered me that I am having the well seen to. If we get some water now, well and good. If we can't raise the level of the water after all this trouble, don't blame me.'

'Maami, how long is it possible to manage without even a bucket or two of water? In all the other houses here there is at least well-water.'

One of the labourers interrupted, 'Where can that be, Madam? Our own men have sunk curbs into more than thirty wells in this very street. It's only in two houses that the water stands at a height of at least four feet. There's hardly two feet of water in any of the rest of the wells.'

'Anyway, make sure that you don't stop up what little water there is here, please,' the landlady told him.

'If we did that, our eyes would be put out. If there is water underground, it simply has to come to the surface. But if the water isn't there, what can we do? It is up to Him to open His eyes. It is up to the heavens to be generous.'

Jamuna turned towards the stairs. The landlady left the labourers instantly and followed Jamuna. As she neared the staircase, the landlady said, 'Do you want to give it to me now, or would you rather add it to your rent?'

'What must I give you?'

'The cost of raising the water level. He's told me to collect ten rupees from each of the families living in our building.'

'But maami, it's the level of your own well that you are raising.'

'My dear, if I had to do it just for my family, would I spend all this money? If it were absolutely essential, I might have thought of putting down just one – or at the most two – curbs into the well. Now we've arranged to put down four. Even so, I'm bearing more than half the cost myself.'

'Are all the others contributing too?'

'The Raayar family have already paid. They paid yesterday. Now it's just you left, and the people occupying the flat at the back of the house.'

'In any case, maami, let me have a word with Chaya first.'

'How does Chaya come into this? She, after all, is talking of going off into a hostel any day now.'

Jamuna took a deep breath. Then, 'Who told you that?'

'What does it matter who told me? It has come to my ears, that's all. Anyway it was you who came looking for the flat in the first place. It was only later that she came and joined you. And she has always been prepared to leave as soon as her husband arrives.'

Jamuna stood there silently. Then, 'Very well, I'll give you the money this evening,' she said.

The landlady would still not leave. 'When did they say there will be water in the tank,' she asked.

'What do I know about it,' said Jamuna.

'But you seemed to be asking them something over there?'

'If I ask you people anything, which of you is prepared to answer me properly? You expect me to drop everything and answer you at length, whatever questions you may choose to put to me. But you can't be bothered even to look at me, let alone speak to me.'

'You certainly can't say that about me. I have always refused to listen if people speak about you in any way that they shouldn't. And I never ignore you or treat you badly.'

'Let me go now, maami. I still haven't finished all my cooking.'

'I have only wanted to support you in any way that I am able. It is not in my nature to act otherwise. You'll give me the money this evening, won't you? I have to pay the men their wages.'

Jamuna did not answer. The landlady continued, 'From now on, I'll get my son to share out the water equally among all the

tenants. Let it not be said that one got more and another less. It certainly looks as if we will never again get water from the taps in this house.'

* * *

It was Saturday. When Jamuna reached her room, short of breath from having lugged two buckets of water up the stairs, she saw Bhaskar Rao, sitting on one of her chairs. She left the buckets by the water drum, and said, as she wiped the sweat off her face with the edge of her sari, 'Welcome. Welcome. Have you been waiting for a long time?'

'Where have you been, leaving your room unlocked like this?'

'They were distributing water from the well. I collected my share. Now I don't need to go there again until tomorrow evening.'

'And where's her highness?'

Jamuna didn't reply to that. 'Will you have some tea,' she asked.

'Come on, let's go out,' said Bhaskar Rao.

'What, now?', exclaimed Jamuna. 'Today is the day they start giving us water from the tank.'

'Such a fuss, and it's only water. I tell you, I'll bring you huge cauldrons of water tomorrow, in my car.'

'But they will be giving us our cards today.'

'What cards? Like ration cards, are they?'

'Well, yes, rather like ration cards. They've set up a water tank in this street. It seems they are going to bring the water in a lorry and fill up the tank once in two days. All the people living in the street get two pots of water per household.'

'Why don't you make us some tea?'

As she was lighting the stove, Bhaskar Rao said impatiently, 'We ought to leave in half an hour.' Jamuna raised the wick of the kerosene stove as high as she could.

Chaya came in just then. In that instant when he looked at her, it was as if Bhaskar Rao had become a fraction smaller. Her face severe, Chaya put her handbag down on the table and called out loudly, 'Jamuna!' Jamuna, who was sitting only about four feet away, sprang up, startled. She saw the tight look on Chaya's face

and didn't know what to say. Chaya said with extreme annoyance, 'How often do I have to tell you not to put the buttermilk in the top compartment of the tiffin carrier?' Jamuna was very well aware that was not the question that Chaya truly wished to ask, and concentrated on straining the tea. Bhaskar simply continued to sit there without moving a muscle. Chaya slid her feet out of her sandals and looked into the drum, contriving to open it as loudly as she could. 'Is there no water?' she asked, in the same tone as before.

'But it's just beside you, in the buckets,' replied Jamuna quickly. When Chaya realized that she had not even noticed what was directly in front of her, she suddenly grew calmer.

Jamuna handed Bhaskar Rao a cup of tea, placed another cup on the table and then went to the stove and blew it out. Chaya helped herself to a single brass chembu of water and left the room. Bhaskar Rao drew a long breath and looked intently at Jamuna. Jamuna avoided his gaze. When she caught his eye by chance after some time, he signalled to her, 'Go on, get ready.' Jamuna took hold of another small chembu by its narrow neck and dipped it into the water, filling it just half full. Chaya came in then, her wet hair clinging to her forehead. Jamuna went out of the room, taking her own vessel with her. Chaya immediately placed her chembu beside the buckets and left the room as well. Jamuna came back into the main room, having used her half chembu of water with extreme care, contriving to wash her hands and feet as well as her face. Bhaskar was standing up by this time, impatient, having finished his tea. When he saw Jamuna, he said softly, but with grim determination, 'Get ready'. Jamuna wiped her face and opened her trunk. At that moment Chaya too returned to the room and began to drink the tea that Jamuna had left for her on the table.

Jamuna took out a sari from her trunk and remarked to Chaya, 'I am going out now. If you go out as well, make sure you lock up behind you.'

Chaya asked, 'Where do you intend to go?' Jamuna turned around and stared at Chaya. Chaya asked again, relentlessly, 'Where do you intend to go?'

Jamuna retorted, 'What is the matter, do I have to ask your permission every time I leave the house?'

Chaya said, 'Why do you bring these dogs off the street and into our house?'

'Nobody here is a dog,' Jamuna exclaimed.

Immediately Bhaskar Rao added, 'I suppose only mongrel dogs themselves recognize others.'

Chaya looked at Bhaskar Rao directly for the first time. 'Oi, mister, get out,' she told him.

'Who are you to tell me to get out?' asked Bhaskar Rao.

'Look here, you loafer, are you going to get out quietly or shall I call the police?' demanded Chaya.

Jamuna called out, 'Chaya'.

'Who are you, woman, to threaten to call the police? They'll surely put you in the lock-up first before they touch me. Why don't you call out the military? You are steeped in military water aren't you?'

Chaya took one of her sandals in her hand. Bhaskar Rao waited, ready for her. Jamuna leapt towards Chaya, calling out, 'Chaya, Chaya.' Chaya shook her off and tried to push her away. But Jamuna held on to her tightly. Chaya said, 'Chi, you shameless woman'. Bhaskar Rao waited, his hair somewhat tousled, red in the face.

Unable to bear Jamuna's grip any longer, Chaya suddenly stopped resisting. 'Let go my shoulder,' she said. Jamuna relaxed her grip. Chaya dropped her sandal. Then she spat into Jamuna's face. Jamuna wiped her face and let go of Chaya completely. Chaya went to a corner of the room.

Jamuna pushed back her hair and unfolded the sari that she had taken out of her trunk. Seeing this, Bhaskar Rao turned his back to her so that he now faced the doorway. 'You might as well watch her. It is not as if you have never seen her undress,' said Chaya in a somewhat calmer voice. Bhaskar Rao made as if he had not heard her. Jamuna peeled off the sari she was wearing and began to put on the fresh sari. Chaya remained in her corner, refusing to look at anyone. When Jamuna had finished with the sari, she re-did her hair in front of the wall mirror. Then, in a second she changed her

blouse, too. Bhaskar Rao, his patience utterly destroyed, fidgeted with his thigh.

Jamuna said to Chaya, 'I must go now. You eat whenever you want.'

Bhaskar Rao turned round and addressed Jamuna, 'Right, shall we go?' Jamuna murmured 'Mmm' in assent. Bhaskar Rao immediately went out of the door.

As soon as he was outside their vision, Jamuna went up to Chaya and stood in front of her. Chaya turned her face away. Jamuna took Chaya's face in her hands and turned it towards herself. 'Chaya,' she said, very tenderly. Chaya pulled herself free and turned away once more. Jamuna forced Chaya to look at her, saying cajolingly, 'Don't be angry.'

Chaya retorted 'Why should I be angry? What do I care what you do with yourself?'

Jamuna looked at Chaya quietly for an instant. Then she asked, 'Where can I go, after all? Don't I need someone too?'

'So do you have to hang around with this loafer?' returned Chaya.

Jamuna asked again, 'Who else do I have? Don't you know there is no one else?'

'I shall go and join the hostel tomorrow, definitely,' said Chaya.

'Are you planning to go away and leave me?' Jamuna asked.

Chaya told her, 'But you have already left and gone.'

At that moment Bhaskar Rao returned to say, 'Why haven't you come down? How long will the taxi wait?' He went back downstairs.

Jamuna still stood there, looking at Chaya. At last she began to move saying, 'I'll be off then.'

'Don't go, Akka,' cried Chaya, 'These people will just use you and then turn you out like a street dog.'

Jamuna said to her, 'And you treat me like a dog in any case.' Then she left the room at last. At its threshold she turned and swept a glance over Chaya. Chaya's eyes, it seemed to her, were full of tears.

* * *

There were distant sounds of people talking to each other in the street. Several different voices could be heard, turn by turn. Men and women, so many of them, seemed to be rushing about here and there, in a great hurry. Intermittently there were the sounds made by cycles. Jamuna lay in bed, listening to all these sounds that she could not blank out. It was still a long while before daybreak. Without exception, all those people walking along the streets now would be carrying either a big water pot or a bucket. Every now and then she could hear the sound of those vessels being carried back, full of water. It was true that a good portion of the water which had been begged and pleaded for, and acquired with such difficulty, actually got spilt on the street. Even in the darkness one could see those long streaks of water, left by the overflow of the vessels on to the street. In fact everybody contrived to see well enough in that darkness. Because of that they managed to rush about in search of water, even without the help of street lights, and without falling upon each other. Jamuna alone lay in her room, without hurrying like the rest, quietly listening to the sounds of the town.

She could hear a footstep that she seemed to know, but staggering now because of an almost unbearable load. At the very moment that she worked out whose it was, she also heard the gates of the house being pushed open downstairs. It was the landlady's husband. The Corporation had dug three or four tube wells next to Pondi Bazaar and attached hand pumps to them. This man must have fetched water from that distance. He was more than sixty years old. He was diabetic besides. Even now he had a weakness for women. And yes, he fancied Jamuna. But by the time he climbed up the stairs he'd be short of breath. This man must now have walked half a mile to fetch this water. There was a tube well in the next street too, where you could sometimes get water. Jamuna herself had collected water from there on occasion. While the pump was working, the water that came through seemed good enough. But within half an hour it would become discoloured. You could not use it for cooking, nor for washing clothes. You could keep it for washing your hands and feet. It was even possible to bath in it after a fashion. Yes, you could bath in it. Indeed, she

herself had taken a bath even in that dubious water. Chaya, however, used to feel too disgusted even to touch it. Heaven knew whether she could ever have bathed in it.

Jamuna turned over and pulled up the sheet that covered her. Chaya had gone. This time she really had gone away. After Jamuna had left with Bhaskar Rao that evening, they had spent the whole night in foolishness, and the best part of the next day too. When Bhaskar Rao had dropped her off at the corner of the street at daybreak on the following day, Jamuna's feet had been full of hesitation. She need not have been so worried. For Chaya had already left. Had Chaya been there, she would have looked directly into Jamuna's face for an instant. A mere instant. That instant alone would have meant a hellish and unending agony. In that moment of unceasing pain, Chaya would have seen reflected in Jamuna's face and eyes all that had occurred in the past thirty-six hours. But fortunately Chaya had not been there. Oh God, had it really been so fortunate? From now on, would Bhaskar Rao not turn up every day? Must she now be dragged by him to sit around with people who were unknown to her by name or town or language? To drink with them, to laugh and to grin and to while away the night through the darkness and the artificial light? When they passed her a drink, why was it so impossible for her to pluck the glass out of their hands and fling it in their faces?

Jamuna turned over and stretched herself out. She could hardly bring herself to lie there. Hereafter she would never again be able to lie upon her bed, awake and at ease. Whether Chaya was with her or not.

Jamuna got up, switched on the lights and went up to the water pot. It was still more than half full of water. She still had the water that she had collected the day before yesterday. After all, it was only for herself, now. How much was likely to get used up? She didn't drink in excess of four or five glasses of water. And she had given up taking a bath every day. Just as she had given up many other things.

Jamuna switched off the lights and lay down again. She alone was able to lie there like that with the lights off, while about her the entire town seemed to be awake and caught up in the turbulence of

the day. Indeed, she could lie there with the lights on too, if she wished. It would not be so hard to lie there in the light, compared to being in the darkness, unable to sleep. Yes, even now she could get up again and switch on the lights.

Jamuna gritted her teeth, forcing herself to lie there in the darkness. How had she not behaved in the full flood of light? At least it might have been better if she had been so drunk that she could not remember anything. But there was nothing wrong with her memory. It was relentless. Her brain, on the other hand, darted about uncontrollably, like a month-old suckling calf leaping from one foot to the other. Lying there, Jamuna covered her eyes with her two hands. This time too, those two fat fellows from Nellore had made her prance about in their hotel room for their entertainment, while they had pulled at her clothes; their eyes bleary, the spittle gathering in the corner of their mouths. These men had promised to put their money into Bhaskar Rao's new film. Did these financial backers who came from out of town always have to arrive in twos? Possibly it was a great entertainment for them, but had it been necessary for her to pretend that she enjoyed it too, grinning and smiling and wriggling and leaping? She could not bear to remember the obscenity of it.

It was just as well that Chaya wasn't there. In an instant, in a single instant, Chaya would have understood what had happened during those many hours. It would have been unbearably difficult for her, Jamuna, to stay even for half an hour in that small room, once Chaya knew everything that had happened. And Chaya would not have ever attempted to hide the fact that she was totally aware of all that was going on. Whatever she did – whether she spoke or stood or stooped down or sat or combed her hair – it would have been impossible for her not to make it absolutely plain through every single action that she knew all Jamuna's secrets. However close a relationship, it is only possible to sustain it so long as a few secrets remain hidden from each other. But Chaya was able to see her, Jamuna, as clearly as if she were looking intently into a mirror. For all that, she was the younger of the two by four years. She was not yet twenty-five years old. She was educated. She had been to college. She was a working woman. She

had married a man of her choice properly, legally – never mind if he was in the army – she had borne a child. Chaya did not know the rage, the fury, the arguments, the shouting, the muttering, the fits and intoxications of the world that she, Jamuna, knew. But although she herself had neither experienced nor observed any of this, Chaya was able to make Jamuna feel shame and hesitation, even to feel fearful, about this world. Chaya, Chaya. How could you abandon me?

Jamuna tossed and turned. It was not daybreak as yet. Still a long time to go before dawn. But the crowds on the street were totally unconcerned about that. They were speeding here and there with their pitchers and their water pots and their buckets, either on foot or with their vessels tied to their cycles. Amongst all this there were some three wheeler cycles fitted with carriers. These could each take a large drum. From where did these people get so much water? Somehow they would manage to collect enough water to fill the drum, which they would then sell to the big hotels. The hotels used the water from these drums for their cooking, for washing their vessels, even as drinking water, perhaps. These drums which were being carried along now had been cleaned perhaps aeons ago, and had been filled in the dead darkness from any decaying well. That water could contain roots, droppings, rubbish, leeches, snails, cockroaches, even frogs. Chaya had gone away to that hostel. Was this the water that she was drinking? Was she drinking tea that had been made with this water? Chaya. Chaya. If you saw even a fleck of dust in the water you used to upturn the entire vessel into the drains. How are you managing in that hostel now? Having left me in disgust, have you learnt to like all these other things that once used to disgust you? Yet, after all, what did I do to you? If I did anything terrible, it was to myself alone that I did it. Why should you have to go away? And have you gone away, really and truly?

Jamuna sat up. She had made out that the landlady, her sons and daughters had all gone out in turn and then returned within the next half hour with water. It was now months since the water had stopped coming out of their taps in that house. For the past month, there was only enough water in their well to fill perhaps

four buckets in a day. It was over fifteen days since the water stopped coming to the one house right at the end of the street. Once in two or three days, the lorry came to fill up the water tank in their street. But because of the increase in numbers of the families who came to collect water there, they each got two plastic buckets' worth instead of the original three. There was a motor pump attached to the water lorry which enabled the water to be transferred directly into the street tank. As the pump worked, belching out smoke, the water was driven into the tank through large pipes above and became available through small pipes beneath. People pushed, shoved and came to blows to get at that water. A few days ago, when Jamuna came away without water, the driver had said meaningfully, as if consoling her, 'I see that you didn't manage to get any water today.' Next time he would definitely see to her needs.

Why? Was he sympathizing with her difficulties in getting water on her own? How foolish it would be for her to assume that there were people who were genuine in their sympathy for her! If anyone seemed to show sympathy towards her, she knew for what reason it would be, never mind if her eyes should grow dim, her cheeks were to fall in, her hair begin to grey in places, her breasts to shrink and sag. Was it because of love or genuine concern? No, no. Why was it that as soon as a man looked at her, he showed no other human feelings except one? It was because of her relationship with Bhaskar Rao. Only because of that. Oh God, he would turn up every day from now on. Chaya, Chaya, how could you have gone away. Have you gone, really and truly? Won't you come back if I ask you to? How am I going to manage without you? What is going to happen to me? How can I manage all alone? Chaya. Chaya.

Jamuna sat up in bed and tore at her hair. It was almost as if she could not be at rest unless she struck hard at her head with the rolling pin. She would go to Chaya's hostel as soon as dawn broke. She would hang on to Chaya's hands and feet and beg and plead with her to return. Chaya was stone-hearted. If she decided on something, she stuck by that. But Jamuna would have to make the effort. She would have to plead and weep. She would have to

humiliate herself. She would have to accept the ignominy of diminishing herself. She'd have to go to her mother after leaving Chaya. No, not that, she would not do that. She might fall at Chaya's feet, but not at Amma's. Anyway it was not possible. She was not Jamuna's mother any more. She could not be anyone's mother. Jamuna would go to Chaya alone.

At that instant she heard someone knocking at the door to her room. With a great shout of 'Chaya', Jamuna opened the door. The world outside was just a little brighter than her room. Outside the door, the stout Teacher-Amma stood waiting with her water pot.

* * *

'What was that you called out?' asked the Teacher-Amma.

Jamuna, calming herself somewhat, said, 'Oh, nothing . . . Come in, Akka, come in.'

'I won't come in now, thank you. I'm on my way to collect some water from the tap. I thought I should stop and look in on you. Why don't we see anything of you these days? My eyes have gone glazed from not having seen you for so long.'

Jamuna wondered whether this Teacher-Amma said those words repeatedly to her alone or whether those eyes tended to go glazed if they didn't see anyone else for a short time. The Teacher-Amma carried on, however, without pausing. 'Mm, come on, bring your water pot. I'll get you some tap water as well.'

'I have enough, Akka.'

'Do you mean the water from the street tank?'

'Yes.'

'If you keep it for another day it will be really stale.'

Jamuna turned on the light switches to the room.

'Hurry up,' said the Teacher-Amma.

'I really don't need any water today, Akka. My water pot is still half full.'

'I'm telling you to come along. Is that amount of water going to remain the same, always? And what will you do if a lizard falls into it suddenly?'

Jamuna emptied the vessel. She put out the light and locked the room. It must have struck the Teacher-Amma suddenly at that moment. 'Isn't your sister here?' she asked.

'No,' replied Jamuna.

'Has she gone somewhere out of town, then?'

'She's gone into a hostel because of the difficulties of getting enough water here.'

'And yet if someone actually offers to help you get some water you keep insisting that your water pot is already half full!'

Jamuna followed the Teacher-Amma down the stairs without answering.

* * *

They had to walk for more than half a mile. That particular house was opposite a large secondary school. Its entrance gate was locked. Clearly Teacher-Amma was considering for a moment whether it might be feasible to climb the gate and jump across. However, changing her mind, she called out, 'Maama, Maama'. Even at that early hour a light could be seen, burning within the house. A little girl, about ten years old, came out of the house and towards the gate, as if to enquire who had come. Teacher-Amma said to her, 'Malati, is Maama at home? Please open the gate.' The girl saw that both Teacher-Amma and Jamuna were carrying empty water pots, and turned and left without saying a word. It was absolutely clear that it was not to fetch the key that she had gone inside. After a long interval, Teacher-Amma called out once again, 'Maama, Maama.' This time the head of the family came out. He peered at Teacher-Amma through the darkness, and then unlocked the gate saying, 'Oh, it's you, is it?' Then he suddenly became aware of there being another person there along with Teacher-Amma. 'Who is this?' he asked Teacher-Amma directly.

Teacher-Amma said, 'She is with me, Maama; it was I who brought her along. We know her very well.'

'Oh,' said the man calmly. But it seemed that any kindness that he possessed diminished sharply once he had opened the gate.

Jamuna followed the teacher inside. They had to walk

something like fifty paces in order to get to the house from its gate. In the back bathroom of the house that stood at such a distance it was somehow possible to pump up some water. A stout workman was pumping water into a bucket which he then emptied into a large trough. The trough stood half full at that time. Teacher-Amma and Jamuna waited at some distance. A medley of vessels had been placed on the floor and surrounding the pump. Quite clearly they could not all belong to the same house.

The man filled a bucket and emptied it in to the trough. Following that he filled the bucket a second time. And once more. At that point, Teacher-Amma said to him, 'We'll just fill our two pots now and go away.'

'How am I going to fill this trough if you people keep on interrupting my work one after another,' said the man, continuing to work the pump. Teacher-Amma went inside, in search of the owners of the house. Jamuna waited by the side of the tap.

She could hear the voices within the house. She could hear Teacher-Amma chattering away to various people, even more animatedly than usual. It was her voice that was heard most often. It didn't seem as if the people in that house either listened to her carefully, or bothered to answer her. All the same, after a while the owner of the house returned to the tap with Teacher-Amma. He spoke to the man, 'Let these people take what they want and go.' By that time, the trough too was three-quarters full. The man stopped working the pump and moved aside. In that semi-darkness, Jamuna struck her foot against the small raised platform which had not been visible to her. 'Can't you watch where you are going?' said the man.

Teacher-Amma retorted, 'How can we watch out? Is it possible to see, however careful we are?'

The house owner said to them, 'You have brought just one vessel each, is that right? In a quarter of an hour the water will stop. We still haven't put away a single drop of water for ourselves.' The workman had left the room altogether. The owner continued to stand there by the side of Teacher-Amma. Jamuna began to work the pump. It was large and very heavy for her to handle.

'Shall I come too? Shall I give you a hand, Jamuna?' asked Teacher-Amma.

'Yes, please, Akka,' Jamuna replied.

The house owner told them, 'If we don't have such a heavy pump, we can't shift the water. But then it's such a heavy pump that nobody in the house can work it. That's why we have to employ this man at a cost of ten or fifteen rupees.'

It was only because Teacher-Amma and Jamuna plied the pump together that they were able to get some water. By the time their two water pots were full their hearts were thumping and they were sweating freely. The house owner watched them. Then he called out, 'Oi, come on. They've finished.'

'We'll go then, Maama,' said Teacher-Amma, turning to leave, still short of breath. Jamuna left with her, her eyes bulging.

When they had reached the street, Teacher-Amma asked Jamuna, 'Are you angry with me?'

'Why should I be?'

'Because I dragged you along with me to fill my water pot.'

'I helped myself too, didn't I?'

'I can't manage to work this demon of a pump on my own. I had terrible trouble with it yesterday. The servant refused to work the pump for me. And that man, his employer, won't ask him to do it, either. Don't be cross with me, my love.'

'It's nothing.'

'You'll think I'm a really selfish person . . .'

'Akka, why do you have to say the same thing again and again? I didn't ever think of you in those terms.'

They returned to their street and arrived at the teacher's house first. 'I'll be on my way, Akka,' said Jamuna.

'Why don't you come inside for a bit? Come in for just five minutes. Come and have a cup of coffee before you go.'

'Please don't bother, Akka.'

'Why not? It's not as if your sister is waiting. There is no immediate hurry for you to go home.'

As Jamuna followed Teacher-Amma into the house, she realized that she had given in to someone else's wishes twice that day, even before the sun had risen.

* * *

It seemed that the entrance gate to that house was never closed. There was a courtyard as soon as you came past it. Set around the courtyard, on all four sides, there were apartments occupied by different tenants. Teacher-Amma's lodgings were adjacent to the gate that led out into the back yard. Although all the other apartments were lit by electric light, the place that Teacher-Amma entered had only a small kerosene lamp burning. Next to it sat an oldish-looking man, well wrapped up in his shawl. He began to ask Teacher-Amma something, but was overtaken by a fit of coughing. Teacher-Amma said to Jamuna, 'Come', and ushering her into the room, switched on the electric light. The man with the cough seemed about fifty years old. Besides him there was an old lady in the room, fast asleep, her arms and legs folded tightly. Against the wall, a pillow and a floor-rug lay in a heap. That was where Teacher-Amma must have slept. Now she pointed to a trunk and said to Jamuna, 'Just sit down for a while. I'll make the coffee in five minutes.' Having said this, she took down the water pot from her hip and placed it in the corner that served as her kitchen. There were three or four pots of water there already, placed one on top of the other.

Carefully Jamuna lowered her own water pot on to the floor and moved towards the trunk that Teacher-Amma had pointed out to her. The man tried to show them something and once again began to cough extensively. What he was showing them was a small stainless steel vessel. Teacher-Amma asked him, 'Did you not buy the milk?' Still coughing, he shook his head to indicate, 'No.' Teacher-Amma lit the stove, and having placed a small vessel of water upon it, ran to the flat next door. When she returned, she said, 'But they tell me the milk-woman has already been! You missed buying the milk when she came round, and now you are making me chase after her.' The man shook his head and coughed some more. Teacher-Amma looked at Jamuna. She said, 'Just watch the stove for a couple of minutes, will you? I'll buy some milk and be back,' and went out.

On the instant that Teacher-Amma left, the old woman who

had been asleep until that moment, sat up. She looked at Jamuna and said, 'Who are you, girl?'

'I live on this street . . .'

'And what is your business here? Get out.'

Jamuna gaped, not knowing what to make of this.

'Why does she drag in all sorts of people into this house, never bothering whether it is the middle of the night or not! Go on, go outside,' the old lady said again.

Jamuna went outside and stood for a moment in the front verandah. Then she went inside again, took up her water pot and started walking home. Before she could get past the gate, Teacher-Amma had returned with the milk. Seeing Jamuna on her way out, she asked, 'And where are you going?'

Jamuna did not answer.

'It was my mother-in-law wasn't it, telling you to go? Come back with me. I knew she was just lying there, not really asleep.'

As soon as she saw her daughter-in-law the old lady lay down again. Teacher-Amma took the boiling water off the stove and placed the milk on it. She looked at Jamuna and said, 'Do sit down. You don't have to keep standing.' The old lady threw an evil look at Jamuna and turned her face away.

Teacher-Amma took up a small brass coffee filter. It contained the coffee concentrate that she had made earlier. She emptied that into another vessel, adding the hot water and the boiling milk. She poured the mixed coffee into two tumblers, placed one in front of the man with the cough and handed Jamuna the other. 'Mm, go on. Drink it up,' she urged. Jamuna had no choice but to accept the coffee. Without admitting that she had not even brushed her teeth yet, she drank a mouthful. The coffee was excellent.

The old woman who had been lying down sat up with a start. 'Where's mine, woman?' she demanded. Jamuna stayed very still.

'Oh, you are awake, are you? Have you brushed your teeth?' asked Teacher-Amma.

'How does it bother you whether I've brushed my teeth or not? It is your duty isn't it, to serve me my coffee too?'

'Don't let us hear all this about what is my duty and what isn't.

If you want some coffee, I'll make some for you before I go to work.'

The old lady gave Teacher-Amma an intense stare and then turned her face away. Teacher-Amma mixed another tumbler of coffee. Now there was hardly any coffee left in the filter.

The old lady put the coffee to her lips. 'What is this hot water that you are passing off on me? Put in some decoction,' she said.

'There isn't any decoction left. There won't be anything at all left for me unless I make some more.'

'In that case, fill your own belly with this.' The old lady flung the tumbler full of coffee at Teacher-Amma. It hit her on the hip before falling to the floor.

Jamuna stood up. The man with the cough had emptied his coffee to its dregs, and set the tumbler down beside him, looking as if none of this concerned him. Without a word Teacher-Amma rose, fetched a cloth and began mopping up the coffee which was spreading on the floor. For a moment her face revealed a grimace of pain. The tumbler would have struck really hard on her hip.

'Do you see the airs she gives herself? And you sit there uselessly, can't you strike her a couple of blows across her back?' the old lady said to the man with the cough. He merely coughed some more. The old lady gritted her teeth and yelled, '*Munde*, you inauspicious widow woman!'

Teacher-Amma lifted her head. 'Hey, don't call me these bad names. You are the munde.'

Suddenly the old woman flew into a terrible frenzy. 'So it has come to this you inauspicious woman, you munde, munde, munde. You slave of a munde, you whore of a munde. You are forty years old, your husband is ill in bed, still you must go wandering about the streets, flaunting yourself, you munde. You will be carried out as a corpse, you'll die, you'll burn. How dare you open your mouth and call me a munde. You barren munde, you've brought nothing but ill-luck and ruin to this family. May you die . . .'

Jamuna was acutely embarrassed. She tried to slip away with her water pot, without saying anything to anyone. The old lady sprang up once more, 'You bring all these bitches inside the house

and give away all that we've got to them. How dare you call me a munde, you bitch.'

A few of the other tenants of that house began to foregather. The man went into another of his coughing fits. Teacher-Amma said very quietly, but with gritted teeth, 'Hey, you old corpse of a woman! Don't fling dirt into the only rice you are likely to get.'

The old woman started to hurl the most fearful curses. At this point some of the tenants went up to her and tried to calm her down. One person returned to her own room and brought the old woman a fresh tumbler of coffee. Most of them also said to Teacher-Amma, 'Why do you have to stir her up? After all, you know very well what she is like.'

When Jamuna left at last, Teacher-Amma came to the gate with her. She gave her a hug and said, 'Don't take all this to heart, Jamuna, little one.'

Jamuna exclaimed, 'All this happened because of me, Akka. Why did you bother about coffee for me?'

'If you hadn't been here, it would have happened, anyway, for a different reason. One day or another, I'll surely run away from all this.' But there were no tears in Teacher-Amma's eyes as she said this.

Jamuna climbed down the steps at the front of the house.

'I'll come for you tomorrow morning as well. I'll be there by four o'clock. We'll go together and collect water again.'

She didn't know how to reply to this.

* * *

Although the entire earth was as dry as a withered leaf, every time the man lifted his crowbar and brought it down, its pointed end pierced the ground to a depth of at least half a foot. There were four other men like him, digging a trench parallel to the street, along the double lines marked there in powdered chalk. The double lines ran at a distance of about three feet from the outside wall of the houses on the street, so there was no interference to the traffic. The white lines ran right past the water tank that the Corporation had installed on that street some months ago. If the

four men continued to dig their trench in front of and past the tank, then it was certainly going to be a terrible nuisance when the lorry arrived with the water to fill it up, and after that, when the people on the street fetched their water. If someone misplaced their foot, or were not careful enough, they would fall into that trench and definitely break their bones.

In former days, when the Corporation sent their men to do some work on that street, there would have been many people anxious and eager to crowd around them and ask for details. Now there were only one or two. The rest, after the odd glance through their windows or front door, were intent upon their own business.

No sooner had the men reached a depth of three feet when the points of their crowbars struck against something which prevented their further entry. The men resumed their digging rather more cautiously and carefully. And there, darkly stretched out, the cast-iron water pipe was revealed. That was the main water pipe for the street. The pipe was perhaps three-quarters of a hand-span in its girth and there were holes all along its length into which were fitted the three-quarter inch tube attachments carrying the main water supply to each house. As the men dug their trench, laying bare the water main, they also pulled out the attachments to the house mains one by one. The head workman who seemed to be supervising the others collected all the parts that came away with the attachments and stowed them carefully in a small bag made of sacking material. He remarked, 'Every single one of these houses has had a "nipple" fitted in.'

A bystander asked, 'What was the good of putting in those nipples or whatever. It's positively months since there has been any water in our taps.'

As if in confirmation with what the man was saying, it was only a handful of rust that fell into the supervisor's hands from the attachment that he had, that instant, removed. 'Hm', said the bystander, turning his face away with some bitterness. The supervisor said, 'We've just closed off the mains beside the park.'

Another man, a recent arrival to those parts, asked, 'What's all this about "nipples"?'

The first bystander said, 'At the point of connection between the

street mains and the house supply, if you add an extra half inch of tubing to the pipe that leads to the house, so that it sits well in to the street-main, then even if there is very little water in the main supply, it will flow to the house.'

'So what's wrong with that,' asked the recent arrival.

The first man said, 'When the Corporation allows the water connection to a house, there is none of this "nipple" business. This is completely unauthorized. He is only allowed to put in a pipe with a stop-cock arrangement. In fact, in the old days, that was quite good enough to allow the water through. But we made them put in these extra attachments last year, paying another forty or fifty rupees. That overseer and his men must have pocketed a cool thousand rupees from this street alone.'

The supervisor said, 'You people trust all sorts of dubious types and you are willing to hand over sums of fifty and hundred rupees to them. But you don't even trust us enough to treat us to a cup of tea worth four annas.'

'Who is there that can be trusted in these days? All we can know is that a few of you have managed to put the entire city in a terrible state for lack of water. Anyway, why are you digging this trench now?'

The supervisor said, 'We need to clean the water mains.'

'Aren't you going to lay down new pipes? There seem to be plenty of new pipes being laid down in all sorts of places.'

'We'll need to do that here as well, sir. At least three or four pipes have to be renewed. In fact the entire pipe system on this street was only recently laid.'

The new tenant put in, 'Sir, they say that places like Mandaveli and Mylapore are not suffering that much. It seems there is water in their taps at midnight. They are able to collect all that they need at that time.'

'Some dishonest fellows came to our street one evening claiming that they would make us a bore-well. They had to make connection with the electricity at my house and left a hundred-watt bulb burning throughout the night. You can get neither wind nor water from the pump that they put in.'

The supervisor said, 'Sir, I am told they dug to a depth of

eighteen feet. Tell me, what can anybody do if there is no water left underground? It was my own young brother-in-law who dug that well . . .'

'Oh, he must have made a beautiful six hundred rupees out of that single well. So why didn't he dig another couple of them while he was about it? Anyway, after that one day the pump handle disappeared. The next day the pump itself had gone. Two days ago they removed the entire tube that had been sunk, and took it away. And some woman in Delhi is giving away thousands of rupees to subsidise this daylight robbery.'

The few people who were gathered there separated and went their way. Any hopes that the older people might have had in the water pipes seemed to drain away. Now there were only the small boys left to while away their summer holidays in the middle of the street, enjoying the spectacle of someone digging a trench.

* * *

The men who had gone for their lunch break at twelve o'clock resumed work after two hours. The supervisor was furious with them. One of the workmen said, 'It is now six years that I've been working for daily wages, doing this coolie work for you. To this day I am only treated as a temporary worker. If I take just ten minutes longer one day to go all the way home, eat my meal and return, should you get so angry, *maistri*?'

The supervisor said, 'Very well, finish the job now, hurry up.'

In many places they were obstructed by the roots of coconut palms. Where they were making the trench, they were forced to cut these out as well as anything else that came in their way. Now the trench had been dug along half the length of the street. The earth that they had removed and thrown up formed a barrier right along it. The supervisor left two of the men to continue with their digging and returned to the street corner where they had first started this work. That was the point at which the street's water pipe joined the water pipe along the main road. The supervisor used his big spanner to open up this attachment. Then his men used their crowbars to lever up the front part of the street main. An

eight-foot length of the pipe came away separately. The men lifted it right out. The street main was made of separate sections of cast iron tubing, each piece being six to eight foot long. As each piece was separated from the next, there were some breakages.

Suddenly, one of the two men who were still working on the trench called out urgently to the supervisor. The supervisor hastened to the place. From somewhere near the water pipe, water seemed to be gushing out and making a pool of mud. At the same time there was an unbearable stench.

The supervisor was alarmed. 'You blind fool, what have you done? Have you gone and broken the drainage pipe?'

The man couldn't reply.

'Hurry up and get some clay or cement from somewhere, you shameless creature!'

The sun was beating down. The workman dropped his crowbar and ran. At that moment a telegraph man entered the street and stopped his bicycle in front of the house with the broken drainage pipe. He knocked on the door and called out loudly, 'Sir, telegram.'

The woman who lived there opened the door. 'Is it a telegram,' she asked. The messenger nodded and she took it from him. She went in again to sign the piece of paper the man gave her and returned with it. It seemed that the telegram contained nothing distressing. The woman noticed the four men standing in front of her house with their crowbars and spades and came out into the street towards them. By now the water from the drainage pipe was causing quite a pool of mud and mire in the trench. 'Is it the water pipe that smells so bad?' she asked.

'Ah . . . yes, there might be a slight smell,' the supervisor said.

'So if you take the pipes out and clean them, are we going to get some water?' the woman asked.

'Amma, if there is water in the mains, then you will surely get water in the house. But there isn't any water even in the reservoir.'

'I don't know. If you somehow help us to get water, you people will gain merit in the next world.'

Just then the man who had broken the drainage pipe came up to them, carrying a handful of cement on an old piece of newspaper.

The supervisor took it from him and said, 'Come on, you fellows, drain this away quickly.'

Their faces clearly indicating their repugnance, the men deepened one side of the trench. The drainage water flowed and collected there. The supervisor waited for a while, hoping the woman would return inside. But she continued to stand and watch. The supervisor climbed into the trench and pushed the mud to one side. The drainage pipe had been laid so that it ran towards the opposite side of the street. But as it did so, it just touched the water main. Where the crowbar had come into contact with it, part of the pipe, about a foot long, had been crushed.

The woman from the house asked, 'What is it, man! Have you gone and broken the drainage pipe, you wretch?'

'Don't bark at us unnecessarily, lady, we know what we are doing,' the supervisor said to her.

The woman went inside the house in great agitation, calling out, 'Just come and look at this.' She returned, practically dragging her husband along. He made his appearance wearing a loose knitted vest even in the height of summer; his head and face were covered in grey hair.

'Look how they've gone and broken up the drainage pipe,' the woman pointed out to him.

The minute he peered into the trench, he became suddenly energetic. 'Oh, Ramachandra,' he said, 'now we've got to replace the entire pipe.'

'If you've got a suitable pipe in the house, then let us have it. I'll of course replace this one immediately.'

'But how can you fix it properly without calling a plumber? And where am I to go for a pipe?'

'In that case we'll put a stone or something against the break and cement it over,' said the supervisor.

As he was speaking, the water gushed out once more from the break in the pipe. 'Close it, man, close it,' said the old man of the house.

The supervisor was now in a position to speak decisively. 'Sir, it is possible for us to close it up for you one way or another. But you

will have a lot of trouble with it later. It is bound to get blocked up every day.'

'But it is you who broke it, man!'

'Sir, we made a slight mistake while we were hard at work. Even if you went and reported us, it is you who will be asked to pay for the new pipe.'

'Am I to pay the price if you break things out of sheer carelessness?'

'Very well, don't do it. We'll close it up any way we can, and go our way.'

'Useless louts and layabouts . . .'

'Now look here, sir, don't say more than you should. I told you, we just made a mistake when we were busy. If your drain is broken, it is you who has to replace it. I've already said that if you give us a new pipe, we'll replace it for you. All right men, get on with your work now.' The supervisor went off with his two men to remove the water pipes that had been exposed and disconnected. The other two men continued with their digging. The woman and her husband were left to stand there by themselves.

The woman said, 'How can they cheat us like this?'

'The times are such that these people can call the tune. We are the ones to suffer, sure enough. He's gone and broken it up completely, the wretch!'

'Why don't we just ask him to close it up in one way or another?'

'Then the drainage from the house will collect here and stagnate. No, if we want to repair it, we must do it straight away.'

'So then, what do you want us to do?'

'There is no alternative to buying and replacing a two-foot length of pipe.'

The woman called out, 'Maistri!' The supervisor came towards them. She asked him, 'What will the new pipe cost?'

The supervisor thought for an instant. 'It might cost, what, perhaps seven or eight rupees.'

Immediately the old man said, 'It won't be more than two, two and a half.'

'Then you buy it for us yourself. Why should we put ourselves out unnecessarily?'

'Send one of your men to me. I'll instruct him.'

'But will he come back soon?'

'All he has to do is to go to the corner of the street. There's a hardware store there. Tell your man to come to me,' the old man said to him.

As soon as the supervisor moved off, the woman asked her husband, 'Can't you go to the store yourself?'

'No, I'll tell the man to go on his own, but I'll make sure that he brings me the bill. That should do,' he told her.

'Don't do that. I'll ask someone to go along with him.' The woman went back into the house. It would be evening before her sons and daughters returned home. Of the three flats in the house which were usually let out, two were now locked up and left empty. Once they had water, the tenants would reappear. The woman climbed up the stairs and knocked. After she had knocked twice, a voice asked, 'Who is it?'

The woman said, 'It is me.' Then she could hear the key being turned from within. After that the bolt was drawn and the door opened.

Jamuna asked, 'What is it you want?'

'Please will you go to the shop at the end of the street? I'll send a man with you. There is something we need to buy very urgently.'

* * *

Jamuna looked at the landlady, and, totally oblivious of what was going on, asked, 'What is it?'

'Please can you go to the shop at the bottom of the street? He's gone and broken the drainage pipe. We need to buy a new one.'

Jamuna stood there silently, her gaze elsewhere. Then, as if she had just come to herself, she asked, 'What's all this, maami? Do you really think it is right on your part to ask me to run these errands for you?'

'Why, what's wrong about it? If my daughter were at home, wouldn't she do it for me? In times of difficulty anybody should be prepared to help out.'

After another moment's silence, Jamuna said, 'Very well, I'll do

it for you.' She removed the keys which were still hanging from the keyhole inside the room. Immediately the landlady asked, 'Why do you have to lock yourself in now, when you are at home?'

Jamuna replied in a somewhat husky voice, 'It's nothing, nothing.'

'You never used to lock yourself in, before this?'

'Yes, well . . . Since Chaya isn't here either, I had a strange notion . . . I thought I should lock myself in.'

As Jamuna stood there, blocking the passage to the door as it were, the landlady came up directly in front, as if she wished to enter the room. Jamuna said, 'Please come to one side, maami, I need to pull the door shut.'

'Just a moment,' said the woman, pushing Jamuna back into the room. Jamuna, in her turn pushed the landlady out. But it wasn't possible for her to stand her ground for more than a few seconds. The landlady had forced her way in. At first, nothing in the room appeared to her eyes as new or extraordinary. She was just about to come out again, with some degree of disappointment. Then she saw the large nail which had been fixed to the wall, protruding from some height, normally used to fix a clothesline which would dry saris. She stood stock-still. Then she turned to Jamuna and said, 'You wretch, what's all this?'

Jamuna did not reply.

'I asked what this is all about,' the woman shouted in a loud voice.

Just then, the workman who was waiting spoke up. 'What is this, madam? Is someone coming with me to the store or shall I just get on with my work?'

The landlady took no notice of him, and without moving from that place, called down to her husband, 'Look here, you've got to come upstairs at once.'

Jamuna said, 'Why do you have to make such a fuss of it? Your workman is waiting, look.'

'What are you saying, girl? So this is just a trivial matter, is it, and not a big affair? You only want to put your head into a noose and die in my house and drag me through the streets, for shame. Is

that it? Look here, how long must I keep on calling you? Can't you come up immediately?'

'Oh, no, please don't call him, maami. Why do you want to do that? I'll go straight away and buy whatever it is you need and bring it back to you at once.'

By this time the workman was becoming impatient. He said, 'Come on, madam, come downstairs. We have to get back to our work.' Jamuna pulled the door to and locked it. The landlady was forced to give way to the most urgent need of the moment. In half an hour, Jamuna had returned from the store, the man following her. A new four-inch wide drainage pipe had been bought. The landlady showed no further interest in that business. The supervisor and his men busied themselves with replacing the pipe that had been broken, and repairing the whole length.

Jamuna went upstairs and unlocked her room. The landlady followed close behind. Jamuna avoided meeting the landlady's eyes. The woman said, 'Now take down that rope.'

Jamuna climbed on to the chair that had been placed in readiness against the wall and unfastened the rope that had been tied to the nail. Even four or five months ago, she could not have jumped off that chair in the certain belief that the rope would take her weight. It certainly would have done, now.

'Give it here, put it into my hand,' the landlady said.

Jamuna surrendered the rope into the landlady's safekeeping, its noose still undone.

'And now, get out!' the landlady said.

'What are you saying, maami? Where can I go?'

'And I could ask, where were you just about to go? I too have turned a blind eye to all sorts of goings-on here. But it seems that at last you were prepared to bring the police right into my house. I don't want you here for a moment longer.'

At this, Jamuna lifted her head and looked directly at the woman.

'I said not even for a single minute.'

Jamuna surprised herself by her own answer. 'I have paid my rent to you regularly. It is not possible for someone just to pick up their bags and leave.'

'You don't have to pay me any rent and you certainly don't have to stay here. Neither do you have to bring disgrace and dishonour upon me by hanging yourself in my house.'

'There has been no disgrace. Nothing has happened.'

'Oh yes, a great deal has happened. But this beats the lot. If my husband or my children come to hear of this, I can't be held responsible for what they might do. So just please clear off quietly. I'll let it be understood that you left like all of the rest of them, complaining of the lack of this and the lack of that and the lack of water.'

Jamuna made no reply, but began to pick up a few of her clothes which were scattered here and there, and to fold them.

'When your younger sister left like that without a word of explanation, I knew immediately that things had come to a head. She wasn't one to look on and let things pass, hiding an anger that is smouldering away in the belly. Please just leave quietly. I don't want this house to carry the reputation of a place where a single woman hanged herself.'

'But maami, nothing like that has happened, has it?'

'Are you asking me what has happened? Supposing a minute more had passed, what would have happened then? Look, I am not going to ask you any questions. But please vacate this room today, this very day. You are just not fit to live on your own.'

'You are saying I mustn't live on my own. Is that what this is about?'

'Even if you get someone to share your room, how can I trust you? When a woman's mind starts off in a particular direction, there is just no hope for her.'

'Are we, any of us, the same from one moment to the next, maami?'

'I don't know about all that. I just don't want you here a moment longer.'

'And if I say I won't go?'

The landlady looked Jamuna up and down. She said, 'Tell me, have I done you any wrong? Why are you intent on making trouble for me? Why are you giving me such a rough time?'

'Don't you think it might be difficult for me too, if you tell me to get out immediately, like this?'

'Use your sense. Think about it yourself. Is it possible for me, in my position, to let you stay? If I had known you would behave like this, I would have said right away that I had no rooms free.'

'What do you want me to do, then?'

'Vacate this room. Otherwise get someone, an older woman, to stay with you. You can do whatever you like with yourself once you are out of my sight. But don't cause any trouble inside my house. I am truly afraid to leave you here by yourself. It seems you are totally unfit to live on your own.'

* * *

Precisely at four forty-five in the afternoon, the water lorry entered the street. This time, though, its journey was not as usual. It was not that easy to negotiate its way through the heaps of earth which were blocking more than half the street, not to speak of the pedestrians who were milling about. When the lorry swerved slightly to the right to avoid an on-coming auto-rickshaw, its front wheel ran over a mud heap, and then rolled on for a few yards, touching the very edge of the trench that had been dug for the water-pipes. The men in the lorry called out, 'Ov, Ov!' Fortunately the wheel didn't slip right into the trench. Since the lorry could not stop right up against the water tank, it stood cross-wise, blocking up the entire road. The driver stopped the engine finally, after its fumes had filled the air.

As soon as they heard the sound of the lorry entering the street, people emerged from their homes, men and women, old and young, school teachers, business executives, fruit-stall owners. They each held a water-pot or a drum or a bucket in their hands. Surrounding the lorry, they walked alongside it as it drove by. In an instant, a long queue had formed in front of the tap to the water tank, made up of children and adults, brass vessels, plastic buckets, tin containers and such-like. Because of the earth that had been thrown up from the trench, people had to be particularly careful about where they stood or placed their vessels. While the

queue was forming, an amorphous crowd was also gathering around the lorry at the same time. People were pushing and shoving against each other, their heavy vessels in their hands, completely regardless of age, class, size or gender. People in high positions, even those with servants, had come, preferring to chase after the lorry themselves. After all, they could not expect their employees to be quite as painstaking and resourceful when they were fetching water for someone else. The lorry driver now cleared his throat, spat to one side, and then lit up a bidi. One of the men who was assisting him threw down a heavy hose-pipe. It fell, first grazing the bystanders thronging about, and then on to the ground, immediately becoming smeared with mud and filth. One of the workmen, making a special effort on that day, pulled it out to its full extent, like a mountain python, and then thrust its mouth into the hole at the top of the street water tank.

Another man who was inside the lorry pulled at a chain and forced open the pump that was attached to it. Letting off smoke and making a great deal of noise, it at last began to work. Water gushed through from the lorry in to the water tank. There was a small tap in that water pump through which there came a little trickle of water from the lorry. The people crowding there were actually coming to blows, trying to catch some of that water. Within a few minutes, the street tank was full and began to drip from a small crack on top. Another little crowd gathered, with whatever vessel that came to hand, shoving and pushing against each other.

The lorry driver struck hard at his horn, twice. A householder who had been chosen to represent the street came running along with three rupees out of the sum of money that he had collected from all the people living there. He handed it over, the fee for having brought them the water. The lorry driver accepted the money and drove away.

After he had gone away, the queue re-formed itself in a manner of speaking, and waited for the street representative to ration out the water at the rate of nineteen litres per family. A few people who had managed to collect some water either from the pump fixed to the lorry, or from the overflow of the tank, already set off

homewards, carrying their vessels with extreme care. But all in all, in that area at least, more water had been spilt on the ground, churning it into mud and slush, than gathered safely into vessels.

One by one the people in the queue collected their nineteen litres of water, either into two plastic buckets, or into one large water-pot. A woman said to Jamuna, 'How come you are not standing with us here today?' Just for a second, the woman asking the question had not been watchful. She misplaced her foot and nearly fell into the trench. Various people gave her a hand, trying to pull her back. Jamuna walked on, without stopping. She asked the small boys playing at the entrance to a building, 'Has Teacher-Amma come home yet?'

One small boy said, 'We don't know of a Teacher-Amma. All our teachers are men.'

Jamuna crossed the steps at the entrance somewhat hesitantly and then went past the gate.

The lights were already on in Teacher-Amma's rooms. Jamuna walked past the rooms at some distance, twice, trying to seem as if she was actually looking for someone else. Teacher-Amma's husband was there, seated on an easy chair, reading a book. A large portion of the rooms was in shadow, so it was not possible for her to see Teacher-Amma's mother-in-law lying there, rolled up, asleep.

Just as Jamuna had decided to give up and go home, Teacher-Amma arrived at last, having finished her school hours. She looked at Jamuna and asked, 'Did you come to fetch me to collect water?'

'No, Akka. I have been waiting for nearly two hours, just to see you.'

'Just wait a minute,' Teacher-Amma said, and went inside her apartment. She laid down her books in a corner and asked her husband something. He answered her in a single word and then began coughing. Now it was possible for Jamuna to see Teacher-Amma's mother-in-law sitting up. Immediately she stepped back to one side. Teacher-Amma picked up a stainless steel tumbler and came out towards Jamuna. 'Come, let us go and buy some milk first,' she said.

'Can't you talk to me at least for a minute before you go,' Jamuna asked.

'What has got into you today, my pet?' Teacher-Amma took Jamuna by the chin and lifted up her face. Then, 'Come on, we can talk as we go. The milkman will shut up shop and go off to the cinema soon. As for these people in my house, they won't so much as bother to collect and put by half a pint of milk when he calls round. Won't do it even for a single day.'

Jamuna walked along with Teacher-Amma. Teacher-Amma continued. 'I've just this minute come back home. Can't even stop to go to the toilet. I must pick up a vessel and run for the milk straight away. After that there is the water to get. Then, the vegetables and groceries. Then there are sixty-two composition notebooks waiting to be marked. In the middle of all that I'll have to check and buy any medicines that have been used up. At some stage I have to make some sweetmeats and put them by for the old man. There are the clothes to collect from the laundry. Oh yes, there's the bedpan to be washed out with phenyl. And I have to look over and check all my notes-of-lessons for tomorrow's school inspection.'

Jamuna said, 'Akka.'

'What is it, Jamuna,' Teacher-Amma asked.

Jamuna said again, 'Akka.'

Instantly, Teacher-Amma came to a standstill. She too, repeated herself. 'What is it, Jamuna?'

Jamuna said, 'Akka.' Unable to say anything more, she leaned against Teacher-Amma and began to weep, right there in the middle of the street.

* * *

For a minute, Teacher-Amma was silent, gently patting Jamuna's shoulder. Then she said, 'Let's go and get the milk, first of all.'

Jamuna blew her nose and wiped her eyes. Teacher-Amma walked on without registering any change of expression on her face. She had been talking endlessly before this, but was silent now. Her face looked exactly the same, however.

There was plenty of the usual bustle and activity going on in the street. Five tube wells had been sunk along the main road running next to their own street, and it seemed there was water in two of those. People who lived at a distance of half a mile or even further had come that far to work the long handle of the pump and carry away a little water. The water ran out with a kind of acrid smell. Men with hand carts were waiting, one next to the other. There were huge barrels tied by rope to their carts which they would fill by pumping the water into smaller vessels. The entire ground was wet and slushy, either from the water that had been used to rinse out vessels, or from their overflow. Those who came wearing sandals hesitated to step there at first, but after a while they took no notice of the mud on their feet and on their shoes as they came close, and even rested their vessels on the muddy ground as they waited their turn at the pump to collect that dubious-smelling water.

The milkman's house was right next to the pump of one of the tube-wells. There was an open space there, whereas up to that point there had been a row of houses right along the main road. Set back at a little distance there was a small house constructed of coconut palm fronds, firmly stitched together. It was dark there, nobody had lit any lamps. While Jamuna waited at the side of the road, Teacher-Amma made her way past buffaloes and cows and their calves, and then called out to someone inside. Within two minutes she had returned to Jamuna's side with the milk. 'Come, we'll go,' she said.

Now it was as if neither of them was under any compulsion to say anything. It was Teacher-Amma's house that they reached first. Jamuna said, 'I'll be off then.'

Teacher-Amma asked, 'Where to?'

'Why, home of course.'

Through the darkness Teacher-Amma looked intently at Jamuna's face. 'I know that you won't go home now unless I come with you. Just wait a moment. I'll boil the milk and then I'll come with you.' She added, 'Why don't you come in as well? You could have some coffee too.'

Jamuna, coming to her senses instantly, said, 'No thank you.'

She wondered, as Teacher-Amma went inside, whether it had been a deliberate intention on the older woman's part, to remind her of the other day's episode, the invitation to coffee and its consequences.

The people collecting water were going up and down the street as if they were part of a procession. At any given moment, all these people were somehow able to get enough water to run their households. It certainly appeared as if it was indeed during this time of drought that these people used water most plentifully. Yet it was actually probable, that during those other times they might have used many times more than now, simply because water had never been a commodity to be used with extreme care. Jamuna stood there, watching the street, not thinking about herself any more. A Telugu Brahman widow wearing a red sari, quite an old woman, turned into the street, carrying a large water pot on her hip. That old woman was probably carrying that much water for her use alone. Heaven knew how far she had been carrying that pot. But after she came within Jamuna's vision, it turned out that it was not going to be possible for her to totter even ten steps further. She began to sway as she stood there. Then, dropping her water pot, she fell right to the ground. Jamuna ran up to her and attempted to pick up the water pot. The old lady called out, 'Don't touch it. Don't touch it.' Jamuna held on to the old lady and helped her to sit up. Still somewhat unsteady despite Jamuna's holding her, the old woman kept falling over. Even so, she reached out a hand towards the water pot which now lay on its side, slightly dented, in a pool of dusty water. Jamuna held on to the old woman more firmly. By that time, four or five others had gathered there. The old lady pulled herself together after a fashion. Before she could herself straighten up her water pot which lay on its side next to her, someone had pushed ahead, touched it and lifted it up. The old lady was immediately overcome with weakness once more. When those who had gathered there spoke to her kindly and tried to help her to her feet, she even began to cry. She rose unsteadily to her feet and grasped hold of her water pot, barely able to stand. She emptied out its contents – for it was still nearly half full – on to the ground. She shook herself free of the grasp of

Jamuna and all those others, and tottered forward on her own. By rights that water pot should have toppled over on her own toes, complete with its water.

In that darkening hour, when it was scarcely possible to make out the thread that one was holding in one's hand, the old woman's blood, shed on that street, was clearly visible.

Teacher-Amma came out of the house and asked, 'What happened?'

'A Granny fell over, water pot and all,' said Jamuna.

Teacher-Amma said, 'Oh, really?' Teacher-Amma's words never, not even in the slightest, mirrored the horror of an incident, Jamuna thought.

'Come, I'll walk home with you,' Teacher-Amma said.

Without further thought, Jamuna followed her. But when they were about ten paces within reach of her house, Jamuna said, 'Akka, I cannot go in there.'

* * *

'Why not,' asked Teacher-Amma.

Jamuna was quiet for an instant, not making a reply. Then, impelled by that very habit of giving an answer to a question that is asked, she opened her mouth.

Mud and mire at the street's water pump. Slush formed by the water pot that the old lady dropped. 'Why not have some coffee before you go?' Blood. Old blood. Who can distinguish between old and young blood when it is spilt on the ground? She herself was young, though. Was she young? How old was she? Twenty-eight. How much blood would she spill? Perhaps as much as a water pot might contain. Perhaps as much as the old lady's water pot contained. The old lady had poured away the water in order to preserve her sense of her self. She, Jamuna, didn't have that sense of self-interest. She didn't share the old lady's observance of ritual purity. Yet she too, like that old lady, was a Telugu woman who was entitled to be called a Brahman woman. She too had spilt blood, indeed poured it all away. That was what she had intended to do today, to end it all. But it didn't happen. The old lady over-

turned her water pot as a sign of her self-respect. Mud and mire. 'Go out of this house instantly.' 'Just go with this man to the store at the end of the street.' 'Shall we go and fetch the milk?' 'Have some coffee before you go.'

Jamuna only saw time receding and receding.

'Akka,' she said.

'Oh no, don't break down once more in the middle of the street and start crying. Come inside now,' said Teacher-Amma. She took Jamuna by the hand and began to lead her into the house forcibly. Jamuna's tears dried then. Teacher-Amma's words mentioned, pointedly, that she had wept more than once.

* * *

They climbed upstairs together. Jamuna pulled out the set of keys which were tucked in at her waist, opened the lock, and pushed at the two doors which opened inwards. The tube light which had been switched on in another house leapt through the open window into Jamuna's room, giving off a pale light, rather like moonlight. The bars across the window threw a long shadow on the floor, like a prison door. Jamuna stood quietly while Teacher-Amma switched on the lights to the room. She then turned to Jamuna and said, 'Now weep all you want.'

Jamuna looked at her resentfully and said, 'I don't need to weep on anyone's shoulder, thank you. Do please go.'

'My dear girl, you hardly ever get angry.'

Jamuna turned her face away and went into the shadows of a corner. A minute later, Teacher-Amma's hands were laid on her shoulders like two wings. The older woman said quietly, 'What happened today? How long can I stay here, just with you? Don't I have to go home?'

Jamuna turned round and looked into Teacher-Amma's eyes. Then she leaned against her and said, 'Akka, Akka,' as the tears flowed once more.

Gently stroking her back, Teacher-Amma said, 'If you are born a woman, what's the good of weeping? You are born a woman in order to grit your teeth and put up with every extremity.'

'I want to die, Akka, I want to die,' Jamuna sobbed.

'We are all going to die. We are all dying.'

'I want to die now. Right now.'

'You seem to have come upon this urge rather late in life. Some of us had this thought when we were half your age.'

'Even when I attempt to die they come and drag me back.'

'Look here, that's quite enough of this talk of death. It is certain that if you really and truly wanted to die, nobody on earth would be able to drag you back. And let me tell you one more thing: if you have either done something you shouldn't have done, or not done something that you should have done, and if you are trying to tell me it is all because someone else made you, then you are only fooling yourself.'

'Even Chaya has left me.'

'So? She told you she intended to go. She left. You didn't ask her to leave.'

Jamuna was still weeping loudly. Teacher-Amma went back softly and made certain that the door was closed properly. Then she asked, 'Are you trying to end your life just because Chaya has gone? Do you want to do it only because your sister has left you? Is that truly the only reason?'

Jamuna stopped weeping and looked up. She gazed into Teacher-Amma's face as if she needed to know right away how much the older woman knew.

* * *

'Would I be about ten years older than you are?' Teacher-Amma asked.

Jamuna waited, not quite comprehending the point of her question.

'I tell you the truth. I couldn't be more than ten, or at the most twelve years older than you are. I haven't become an old woman just yet. Do you know how old I was when I got married? I would have been just about fifteen. My husband was already over forty-five at that time. You say that nobody will even let you die in peace. Let me tell you about myself. At fifteen, I came of age. One

day they pushed me into a room and told me to get in there with him. He was coughing away when I went in, and he just continued like that for another ten minutes. I have no feeling of restraint in saying all this to you Jamuna, because I really want you to know. For the next ten minutes or so he gritted his teeth. He stopped coughing, but he looked as if he had lost his senses. Suddenly he went into a kind of frenzy and fell over with a thud. And then the cough returned. That was the first time that I had ever seen such a thing. He coughed fearfully, his chest and stomach and shoulders all twisting in violent paroxysms. By an ill fortune, a light burning elsewhere threw enough light there for me to see everything. It might have been very much better for me if there had not been enough light. But there was. To my eyes, what was happening was as clear as it would have been, had it been broad daylight. I didn't shut my eyes. Nor could I turn my eyes away elsewhere. His eyes were bulging out. His tongue was curling inwards and then lolling out again. His eyes and nose were absolutely streaming. People usually can't face things that are as frightful as that. If they even have an inkling that something as frightful as that is likely to happen, they tend to make a quick get away and make certain that they are nowhere near. But I just stood there. I stood watching, without so much as batting an eyelid. I didn't know whether I should have held his head or body. But what use would it have been, even if I had done that? Nothing was going to help. Later I realized that, only too well. I didn't know it at that time, though. I stood at the distance that you are standing from me today, watching a man in convulsions on the floor, as if he were suffering from an epileptic fit, and all because he had been in a frenzy to embrace a woman, and couldn't resist that frenzy. It was so ugly, so humiliating. I stood there though, thinking not just of that moment. I thought, is it going to be like this tomorrow, and the next day, and the day after that? It didn't strike me then, that we should all die, that I should die. I thought, it's going to be like this everyday, always, forever, as squalid and repulsive and ugly as this, how will I be able to last out for as long as ten years? I didn't think that I should die. I didn't think that I should kill the man who was lying in front of me, twitching. He was a man with a weak

and diseased body. Even though he must have known that it would end with him lying there like that in front of a young girl whom he had only just met, twitching in that piteous, humiliating, disgraceful way, his lust had proved greater than his sense of shame and honour. I stood there thinking that this man had been brought to this pass, driven by a trifling desire.

'It seemed that they were familiar with that kind of incident in that household. Even though there was so much noise and confusion going on in that room, well up to half an hour, nobody came anywhere near us. With all that coughing and those dreadful spasms, the man could have died, and not a soul would have come. Even though I was only little, I could have throttled his neck with my bare hands, and no one would have been present. In fact, had I thought like you, I must die, I want to die, and committed suicide, no one would have come and stopped me. Of course nothing like that happened. But it might have done. And the point is that my husband's family must have believed with great certainty that it would not happen.

'Come to think of it, the really terrible days were the ones that came after that first day. I haven't ever wanted to speak to anyone else about all that. Nor have I wished to pray to the gods and complain to them about all this. Left to myself, I have no wish even to go to the temple. But of course I can't refuse to go. When I do go, I feel no desire to weep. Like a spectator, I watch what's going on. When the camphor is lit, I cup my hands above the flame and then touch my eyes, like everyone else. I drink the holy water that is poured into the palm of my hands. When all of them bring their hands together and bow their heads, I do so too. I'm not telling you all this because I think there is anything special about my life, or that I am particularly proud of it. How many people there must be in a similar position! Heaven knows what sort of troubles they face, how many, many troubles! You too. How is it that you have come to such a pass that you can see no comfort anywhere?

'Do you imagine your sister has a particularly easy time? If you too went out to work and stood in a line on the first of the month, holding out your hand to your boss, you'd know what kind of

torture that is. However hard you've worked to earn it, at that instant when someone is in a position to give you money and you are in a position to accept it, there is no difference between your boss and your husband. And it doesn't matter whether you are a virtuous wife or a harlot. Yes, I too am one of those first-of-the-month women. I don't have just one husband, I have nine of them, male and female – our headmistress, the school correspondent, the Chairman, the Inspector of Schools and so on and so on. If I were you I'd be looking for a noose to hang myself, everyday. I'd have to go round looking for an Akka whose shoulder I could weep on.

'I'm not saying any of this by way of comforting you. But what comfort do you need? What is this terrible thing that has happened to you? All your burdens are in your own head and inside your own eyes. Your eyes don't seem to look outward at anything. It's as if you are not really looking at others, your eyes turn them into images of yourself. Your mirror is a distorting mirror. Jamuna, why is it that you are so full of self-pity? Why is it that you can't see others, or think about others, or care about others?'

Jamuna was quiet, not knowing how to answer. Nor did Teacher-Amma seem to expect an answer to her questions. But as soon as Teacher-Amma's voice ceased altogether, Jamuna became troubled. 'And who is there to care about me?' she asked.

'I care about you. It doesn't seem to have struck you that I would worry about you. And heaven knows how many others there are, whom you have not even thought about. In any case, do you have to be concerned about people only if they care about you? Don't you think that is small-minded? Why are you so poor in this? You have a roof above your head, it seems you have some money in hand, you have enough human strength to be friendly, to talk to people and you have the custom and practice of human speech. Then why should you be so poor? All your sorrow, all your difficulties are because you are so poor within yourself. You say you have nobody but yourself. But you yourself have so few resources, have nothing. What can the poor receive from the poor? Wipe your eyes and think about it for an instant. And I'll tell you another thing. You may call Bhaskar Rao all kinds of names and

blame him for everything. But whatever use Bhaskar Rao has made of you, you've made more use of him.'

'Oh, no, no.'

'I don't know everything about it. I don't ever look out of my window to watch what other people are doing. Nor do I keep probing people and asking them about their lives. So I don't know whatever it is that Bhaskar Rao gets up to, with you. But I do know men like Bhaskar Rao, and I do know women like you. Is it possible for a man to become so friendly with a woman unless she actually allows him that much room?'

Jamuna said, 'It isn't as you think it is, Akka.'

Teacher-Amma said, 'Don't start crying again, immediately. It is watching all these tears that have dried up my own. I haven't got any opinion about your personal life. You don't have to tell me anything, either. I didn't speak to you about myself by way of telling or exchanging secrets. If we try to describe everything that happens to us, it would take all of sixty years to relate the events that happened when we were three years old. You don't have to tell me anything. But just think about it. Just think about what has happened instead of telling yourself you want to die, you want to hang yourself.'

Mingled with the noises down below in the street, there suddenly came a metallic, banging sound. Both Jamuna and Teacher-Amma heard it. Teacher-Amma went to the window and looked out. At once she called to Jamuna, 'Come here.' Jamuna went up to her and looked out as well. In the dim light that fell on to the street from the houses lining it, they could see the outline of two small children, under ten years old, standing next to a heavy water pot which they had just set down. Jamuna looked at Teacher-Amma, with an expression that said, 'Well?' Teacher-Amma said, 'Does anything strike you about them?' Jamuna was quiet. Teacher-Amma said, 'You too bring water like this, everyday. Every single person in this city does this very thing. But think how conveniently you are placed. If pressed, you could manage for an entire day, on a single small chembu of water. These children are carrying a great big water pot which they can scarcely manage between them. Poor things, where do you

suppose they live? Surely it must be in some hut. I wonder how much further they have to go. And do you think all that much water is for these two children alone? It's almost certain that the adults in their house have nagged at these children, possibly abused them, and sent them off in pursuit of water. But why would the children put themselves to such trouble just because they have been shouted at? They could have spilt half the water. Or they could have returned with their empty pot saying there wasn't a drop to be had anywhere. They didn't do that though. There they are, struggling against their own strength for the sake of someone else. When you see them like that, how can you think of your own difficulties as great ones?'

Jamuna was speechless. No great change came about at that moment. The light in the room shone as it did every evening. The different calendars indicated the days of the month as they always did. She stood there, as far as she was aware, in her normal manner. And yes, Teacher-Amma too looked the same, her familiar self. Perhaps she looked just a bit fatigued. It wasn't simply that she had been talking for such a long time. It was the tiredness that comes with age. The tiredness of having worked all day, of having engaged with the world all day, of having returned from all that. The weariness of having, as yet, to deal with her husband and mother-in-law at home. And yet, in a strange way, she did not seem totally exhausted by all this either. However tired she was, she was still in a fit state to ready herself for the next thing she had to do. She was short and stout; her flesh bulged at the waist. She wore a handloom sari which was creased and soiled from having been worn all day.

'Shall I go now?' asked Teacher-Amma. 'I should have been back at my place long ago.'

Jamuna said, 'Have some tea with me before you go, Akka.' Teacher-Amma smiled slightly. 'Very well, but hurry.'

Jamuna hurried to light her stove. She had not lit it since that morning. Out of the ten wicks, two or three refused to burn. After a while, as soon as the flames came through all the holes evenly, even the ones which would not light, Jamuna set the water to heat in a vessel, and took down the tin in which she kept the tea-leaves.

Teacher-Amma, rather than stand there doing nothing, began to pick up the saris and petticoats that lay scattered about, and to fold them and put them away. When Jamuna caught her eye, once again she smiled, very slightly. Jamuna wondered at the way things had seemed to resolve themselves, without herself saying a word. Suddenly the room felt a shade cooler. There was a perceptible heaviness in the air. After a few seconds they heard a steady tap-tapping sound. Teacher-Amma was shaking out and folding a sheet. 'What, is it drizzling?' she asked.

Jamuna went to the window and stretched out her hand. The window had a wide sun-shade set above it, preventing her from reaching right out. She opened the door, went out and put her hand out once more. 'Rain,' she said. Meanwhile the water began to boil on the stove.

* * *

The train that should have arrived in Madras at five in the afternoon did not reach there until nine-thirty at night. He got off on to the platform with his three bags, a basket, and a small bundle tied up in a dirty cloth. Reluctant to call a porter, he struggled outside, carrying all his luggage himself, with great difficulty. Finding neither a taxi nor an auto-rickshaw, he walked opposite the Central Station, to the bus stop just outside the General Hospital. As he was half-way across the road, he was struck with fear that at any moment a traffic policeman would shout at him for not taking the underpass, but just walking across like that. Fortunately he managed to cross the road without interference. Even at that hour, buses coming from the north of the city were crossing the Memorial Hall, turning right rapidly and rushing towards him. But although five or six of those buses had gone past, the one that would take him to his part of Madras had not arrived. He was, in any case, full of doubt whether he would manage to clamber in with all his bits and pieces. That basket of fruit which they had forced on him although he had begged and pleaded to be let off, that basket full of green bananas and wood-apples was awkward to carry besides being really heavy. He could

buy the very same bananas for more or less the same price in Madras. And what on earth would he do with a dozen wood-apples? He might throw them in anger against someone's skull and break them open. Perhaps this was the time to throw a couple of them on his own head.

He might, he thought, wait another five minutes and then go on to Park Station and take the electric train. It was only by travelling on the electric train that it might be possible for him to get away without any difficult encounters. The ticket dispenser can hardly discern the palm of the hand of a customer through that small window. Anyway, through that narrow gap, everybody's hands look fairly similar. Whoever the person to whom that hand belongs, the palm tends to be pale. Sometimes it will offer its money in notes, sometimes in small change. To show one's hand is not, after all, the same as showing one's face. And then, climbing into the electric train, either sitting or standing in a compartment, climbing down again at one's destination, going up or coming down a set of stairs, handing over one's ticket to a white-coated figure holding out its hand – none of these actions forced one into any kind of relationship with anyone else. There was no need to haggle, there was no need to work out how much one owed, there was no need to insist on the return of the small change that was yours, to wait for it hesitantly. No need to submit one's form, one's face and one's eyes to someone else's keen suspicion.

And then, a brightly shining taxi came to a stop next to him. The taxi-driver looked at him through his mirror. The young man shook his head to indicate that he didn't want to take it. For an instant it looked as if the taxi was going to drive off. Then it stopped again. 'Where do you wish to go Sir?' the taxi-driver asked. Being the sort of person who could not refuse to answer, he named his part of town. 'Get in Sir, I am on my way to the shed in Saidapet. Just give me one rupee extra for the luggage.'

He said, 'It's not possible for me to pay extra for the luggage.'

'How will you go anywhere without paying for your luggage? Just put in something extra, then.' The young man mumbled something inaudibly. 'Get in,' said the taxi-driver.

Carrying his bags and bundles with both hands, he stood in

front of the vehicle, unable to open the door. The taxi-driver just stayed where he was, eyeing him. He placed two of his bags on the ground and opened the door. The driver said, 'Don't put your basket on the car seat.' The seats were arranged in such a way that there was no space between them, where he could put his basket down. Finally he had to carry it, complete with its green bananas and wood-apples, on his lap. The taxi started. A bus bound for his part of town, drove past them, half empty.

As the taxi went tearing through a stagnant puddle of water, some drops splashed right up into his face. 'Oh, did it rain here yesterday, then?' he asked the taxi-driver. The taxi-driver went on his way, without registering the slightest expression on his face. The vehicle crossed a brightly-lit area, and came in to one that was in total darkness. They passed two more turnings and came to another part of town where the street lights were burning. Here it was not so bright, though. A man with a pushcart went along, a lamp in his hand, carefully placed upon a piece of paper. The taxi accelerated briefly to pass him, and then returned to its former speed.

'The second passage to the left, after you've passed the cinema you see over there,' he said. Then in a minute, 'No, not here. The second street on the left.' For a second the taxi came to a dead stop. Then it moved slowly forward and turned to the left. There was not a single street light burning there.

Before they had gone more than two feet into the street, he said, as though he had suddenly remembered something, 'Don't drive to one side. Go right through the middle of the street.'

The driver said, 'What was that?'

'Don't go along the edge of the street. Go right through the middle,' he said. Then, 'That one there. Just before the last one on the left.'

Even though the taxi had gone down the middle of the street, it had to drive over large and small stones and lumps of earth, rattling and shaking on its way. 'Look, that's the house. The next one,' he said. Then, 'This one right here.' The driver swerved very slightly to the left, as if that was his usual practice. There was a sudden strange noise. After that the car moved, as if of its own

volition, still further to the left. Then it came to a standstill with a sharp grinding sound. In half a second, the driver sprang out of the car and came round to its side.

Meanwhile, the young man stepped out, still holding his basket. As he put a foot down, it began to sink immediately. Before he could place his next foot a good pace away, the first foot had sunk to a depth of several inches. When he managed to pull his leg clear, the sandal remained behind, stuck well into the mud.

He put his bundles and his bags down and waited to pay off the taxi. During this time, the taxi-driver lit a matchstick and took it round to examine the left wheel of the car. Both left wheels were buried into a band of mud unrolling along that side of the road like a loin cloth.

The taxi-driver asked furiously, 'What, man, why couldn't you have warned me properly that there was this hole here?'

'But I told you twice not to go to one side of the road.'

'What did you actually say? Shouldn't you have told me that there was a trench along here? How am I to pull the car out now? Go and ask them to switch on the light in the house.'

'How much does the meter come to, please?'

'Tell them to switch on the lights, man. Let me get my car out of this first. You seem to have a fine way of displaying your brains.' The taxi-driver was getting abusive.

He lived in a small room, right at the back of the house. He knocked on the front door gently and called out, 'Sir'. The driver came back to his seat and started his engine going. Once again he stopped it and went to examine the tyres by the light of his matchstick. Even through the darkness, the tyres looked shiny and worn. The driver cursed particularly and comprehensively.

From the landlord's portion of the house, a voice was heard saying, 'Who is it?' He, the traveller, asked them something in a self-deprecating voice, after which the front lights of the house were suddenly switched on.

'Have Ranga and Madhu gone to sleep? If we can manage to find at least one person to help we might be able to pull the car out,' the young man said.

The owner of the house, having been woken up so suddenly

from his sleep, was at first incapable of taking in anything that was going on. But by the time he was joined by some women and a three-year-old child who had all come from their respective beds to foregather there, matters became clear to him.

One of the women said, 'This is getting to be a constant job around here, day and night.'

He asked, 'Did it rain in these parts today?'

'There's been a bit of a drizzle for the past couple of days. Before two drops could fall, the front entrance to the house had become churned up with mud and muck. There's no knowing when the men who dug the trenches are going to return and fill them up properly,' she told him.

The young man who had just arrived, two youths who belonged to the house and the taxi-driver worked together for half an hour, their arms and legs driving through the mud as they struggled to free the left wheels of the car. One of the youths from the house said, 'They only managed to pull out the car that got stuck this morning by bringing a jeep. If not a jeep, we need at least four hefty cartmen. Of course at this hour you are not likely to get either man or vehicle.'

The taxi-driver said, 'Just as I had finished for the day and was setting off for home an inauspicious wretch had to bring me this adversity.'

The traveller reminded him, 'I didn't ask you to stop for me.'

The taxi-driver locked the windows and doors of the car and at last came to stand by the meter. It rang loudly as he turned it. The traveller handed over a five rupee note. The driver pocketed it immediately and walked off into the night, still cursing.

The traveller and the young man from the house stood there together, briefly. The traveller said, 'I need have paid no more than four annas to get here, had I taken the bus.'

'You should have checked the meter and settled up immediately.'

'How was that possible, my friend? He began by cursing my mother and sister and then called me every name he knew.'

The young man from the house folded his arms and grasped his

elbows. 'That's the way they talk to you these days. You have to pay through the nose and then be humiliated on top of that.'

'At least if there had been some street light it might not have turned out so badly. Why isn't there a single light tonight?'

'There hasn't been any street light for the past week or ten days. To start with there was no water. Then they dug these trenches with some grandiose notion of changing the mains. That was all we needed. Now we have neither water nor light. Do you know how many vehicles have come to grief here? And in broad daylight too! You know the firewood emporium down the road? It's celebration time for the workmen there. These days they don't ask for less than ten rupees each to pull a car out of the mud.'

'I've gone and lost my sandal as well.'

'My uncle's car got stuck like this just here, last Saturday. After they got it out, they had to spend another hundred rupees on repairs. The axle, the steering rod and everything had to be straightened out.'

The traveller was quiet for a while. Then he asked, 'Was my mother here the day before yesterday?'

'No, she wasn't. I don't think she knew when you were returning. She left you the keys. I'll fetch them for you.'

'Is there water in the taps now?'

'Oh no. The very next day after the rains came, the Commissioner of the Corporation issued a statement saying that even though there had been rain in the city, there had been none in the reservoir. We are still fetching water from the bore-well, all the way from Pondi Bazaar.'

'I say, I've lost my sandal. Do you think I should look for it straight away? I could do it if I had a torch.'

'Look for it in the morning. You might find four or five extra ones as well.'

'Heaven knows what abuse that taxi-driver is going to give us in the morning.'

The two of them went in together. The single house light that had illuminated the dark street went out.

* * *

Jamuna set off at dawn telling herself that whatever the outcome, she would go to Chaya that day. Noticing a taxi parked on their very street, four houses along, she hastened towards it. It was only when she came right up to the vehicle that she realized that it had no driver and that its wheels were buried in the mud and waiting to be lifted out.

* * *

When Jamuna finally arrived in Chaya's room, Chaya herself was out. The other young woman who shared her room happened to be there and looked up at Jamuna and asked, 'Who did you want?' When Jamuna had explained, she said, 'She'll be back soon. Do sit down.'

The hostel wasn't a very lively looking place. Although it was indeed full of the young women living there, somehow they were all preoccupied with their own business. And then, whoever it was that one's eyes lighted upon, she carried an expression of weariness that suggested that her earliest years were over. There were two beds in Chaya's room. Each bed had the poles and frame meant for mosquito netting. But plainly, the frames were being used only to dry clothes. Six handkerchiefs, a petticoat, three bras.

Chaya came in. Her face registered shock on the instant that she saw Jamuna, but after that she made as if there was nobody at all in the room, other than herself. In the end, however, it was impossible for her to ignore the third woman in the room, so turning to Jamuna, she asked, 'What brought you here?'

'To see you, of course. If you haven't been to see me, does that mean I shouldn't come to see you?'

Chaya looked at Jamuna as if she was hearing the most unfamiliar words spoken by one who was most familiar to her.

'They sent word that Mother's health was very much worse.'

'To me as well. I went to see her last night.'

'How is Amma?'

'It's true, she's pretty bad.'

After a silence, Jamuna asked again, 'Did she say anything?'

'Why don't you go and find out for yourself?'

'I certainly intend to go. I thought I might take you with me, if you hadn't been to see her already.'

They were both silent. Then Jamuna asked, 'And you? How are you?'

'As you see me.'

'What is the matter? Why do you answer in this cryptic way?'

'I only know how to give answers. You are the one who acts things out, aren't you?'

At this point, someone called to the third young woman in the room, who left immediately.

Jamuna asked again, 'Did Amma say anything to you?'

'What can she say? Particularly when Grandmother and that ancient Uncle of ours are always there?'

Chaya's impatience was becoming very obvious. Jamuna asked her, 'Is it getting very late for you?'

'Yes.'

'You have to leave soon?'

'Yes. In exactly twenty minutes.'

'Have you had your bath?'

'No.'

'Are you not going to bath?'

'There's a water shortage here, too.'

'So do you manage all that in the office rest rooms then?'

'It isn't as easy as that any more.'

'Why?'

'Many of the men turn up for their baths there too.'

'It's obvious there ought to be separate bathrooms for women.'

Chaya smiled slightly too. They were both quiet for a moment. Then Jamuna prompted, 'Would you do something for me?'

'What?'

'Take a day's leave today.'

'And then?'

'Come with me to see Amma.'

'You are still scared to go and see Amma on your own.'

'What is there to be scared of, after all that has happened? But just be there with me.'

Chaya did not reply immediately. Jamuna asked, 'What do you say?'

Chaya turned her face away with a look that said, there is nothing to say. Jamuna spoke again.

'Chaya.'

'What?'

'Come back and stay with me.'

'How?'

'Just as you did before.'

'How can it be the same now as before?'

'Why, what has happened now? What have I done that I should not have done?'

Chaya made no reply.

'Do you want me to fall at your feet and beg forgiveness?'

'Why should you fall at my feet?'

'It is I who have come looking for you. It seems it is I who have to do the pleading.'

'I don't want to hear any of that.'

'Then just come away with me. I'll cook your meals for you. I'll wash your clothes for you. I'll keep house. I'll fetch the water. Nowadays it's not so bad for water there.'

'He writes to say that he is likely to be transferred to these parts within three or four months.'

'Let him come. Until then, let me look after you. We could even bring Murali away with us. We might start him off at school this year.'

Chaya's face changed subtly as soon as Murali was mentioned. Jamuna asked, 'How is Murali?'

'He can't tell the difference between his mother and his grandmothers.'

'Have you not been to see him that often, even after you moved in here?'

'No.'

'Why, how often have you been to see him?'

'Once. Yesterday.'

'Have you not been there at all, these three months?'

'No.'

Suddenly Chaya gave a sob. Jamuna rose quickly and put her arms about her. Chaya instantly shook her off. Jamuna was shocked into silence. Calming herself down somewhat, Chaya said, 'Don't misunderstand. This is the sort of place where people think it is odd for even sisters to be seen embracing.'

'Chaya, Chaya.'

'Akka . . .' Chaya couldn't say anything more. Then she moved off to sit on her bed. 'I don't know what to do, either,' she said.

'Shall I tell you?'

'Mm.'

'Take the day off. We'll go together to see Amma. And after that, we'll go on to my place. If possible, we'll take Murali with us.'

'That's the one thing that can't be. He must stay there until I have a place that is absolutely my own.'

'Very well, let him stay then. But you come away with me.'

Chaya said nothing. After a while she spoke. 'If I come to stay with you, I have no peace of mind at all. Neither can you conduct your life in the way that you want.'

'Leave aside what I want. Do you have peace of mind here?'

Chaya did not reply to that. Then she said, 'So what do you want me to do, Akka?'

'Come, we'll go and see Amma together.'

'I haven't asked for leave.'

'Why, do it now. Is that so impossible?'

'No . . .'

'You are so critical of me. But do you behave towards Amma in a way that pleases her?'

'Who can act in a way that truly pleases someone else? We are each of us individuals.'

'And can't we stay together, understanding that much?'

Chaya turned and looked at Jamuna intently. Then she said, 'When you are bent on ruining yourself in front of my very eyes, is it possible for me to look on without saying a word?'

Jamuna was silent for a while. Then she said, 'I think that I am asking you to come back because I know that you are distressed about me. Listen, if we choose to destroy ourselves, that is our

choice. There is another choice we can make though. But let us not talk of that now. Come on, get ready.'

Chaya rose and went to her mirror. She lifted her hands up to her hair and tidied the knot poised at the back of her head. Jamuna ran up to kiss her. 'My Chaya, my Chaya,' she said.

'Akka.'

'Let's go.'

Chaya pushed her powder box and her brush and comb towards Jamuna. Jamuna did not touch any of these things.

Chaya said, 'Have you had some coffee?'

'Yes, I've had mine.'

'I haven't, as yet. Let's both have some downstairs, before we set off.'

'Fine.'

A little later, Jamuna asked again, 'How is Amma, really?'

'She's lost control over her memory, to a great extent. For a good half hour after I arrived, she kept thinking I was you.'

'Even though you had told her?'

'As soon as I went, I said, it's me, Chaya. Even then, for a long time she talked as if I was you.'

'Poor Amma.'

'It has become very difficult for her. Everything has to be done in bed, with her lying down. When I arrived I could see that her sari was wet through. I wondered whether I should change her myself. But how could I do that without knowing where her sari and all her bits and pieces were kept?'

'Didn't Grandmother or aunt or any of them come to her?'

'So long as I was there, not a soul came near her. But as I came away after seeing Amma, Paati began shouting at me non-stop.'

'What about?'

'Oh, it was the same old story. She yelled that we haven't sense enough to look after our own mother, but leave her abandoned there, and go off thoughtlessly gallivanting around town. All the little ones were about her, listening. She kept on shouting, nevertheless.'

'Wasn't Murali there?'

'I think someone had taken him out somewhere. Somehow I was too scared to ask.'

Jamuna took Chaya's hands in her own. Once again Chaya calmed herself down and said, 'In a sort of way, what Paati and Maama and Maami say is justified, isn't it? You left home because you wanted to live your own life. And I came away with the same intention. Which of us thought about Amma then? Which of us cared about her?'

'Have you forgotten all the things that Amma said, joining in with Paati? All the names that Maama called us? They made it impossible for us to stay there for even a single moment after that.'

'But all the same, you have to agree that it is they who now look after Amma even to this extent.'

Chaya was ready to leave. Jamuna asked, 'Don't you have to lock your room?'

'That other girl has to be at her office only at ten. I'll just go and tell her.'

Chaya went outside and returned in a couple of minutes with the other young woman. She gestured towards Jamuna and said, 'My elder sister.'

The other girl joined her palms in greeting.

Jamuna and Chaya climbed down the stairs and went to the dining-room of the hostel where they had their coffee. By the time they came out into the main road, the traffic was in full flood. They had to wait for ten minutes before a taxi would stop for them. When they had finally got their taxi and had climbed into it, just as it moved off, Chaya asked Jamuna the question that she had suppressed for so long, and which now came bursting out.

'Did Bhaskar Rao come again, after that?'

Jamuna said, 'No.'

'Will he come again?'

Jamuna did not answer that question. The taxi increased its speed.

* * *

Jamuna and Chaya opened the gate and stepped inside. They

could see their uncle, in the front garden, collecting flowers, Murali standing by his side. 'Is it Chaya?' he called out.

'Yes, maama,' Chaya replied.

'Are you well? Murali, boy, it's your mother.'

Murali hung back, clinging to their uncle's *veshti*. In one leap Chaya had gone up to him and gathered him up in her arms. Murali gazed intently into her face.

'Well, what brings you here again?'

'I came to see mother, maama.'

'It's all of two days since I sent word to Jamuna as well as to you.'

'She's come with me.'

'Can you stay awhile?'

'I've taken leave for the day, maama.'

'Good. Well, go and see your mother. I need to speak to you both a little. Have you heard from Venkat? Someone told me that he was trying to get a transfer to Madras.'

'Yes. It's true.'

'Right. Well, go and see your mother. Did you get your bus straight away, last night?'

'Yes, I did.'

'Did you reach home before it started to rain?'

'No, I got caught in the shower.'

'You could have stayed the night here.'

Chaya said nothing. She stroked Murali's face and kissed him. He continued to gaze at her in exactly the same way as before.

A little girl, about ten years old, came out of the house and said, 'Appa, mother wants you.'

'I'll come soon. Look, let me finish gathering the flowers, and I'll be there.'

'Shashi,' called Chaya. The little girl stood still at the front steps of the house. Jamuna went up to her and gave her a hug. The child accepted the embrace cautiously. Murali twisted away from Chaya's grasp and towards Shashi, calling 'Akka'.

'Why, Shashi, won't you speak to me?' asked Chaya. Shashi gave her the slightest of smiles. They all went inside the house, except for their uncle. Even at that hour, the house was somewhat

dark inside. Murali struggled free of Chaya's arms and climbed down. A bed stood on the verandah adjoining the main living room. Chaya and Jamuna went up to it. Chaya called softly, 'Amma, Amma.'

Their mother lay there, asleep, her mouth open. Her entire face was swollen. Jamuna went up to the bed, knelt down, and said 'Amma', as she gently stroked her mother's brow and head. Their mother opened her eyes. Shashi brought a chair and placed it by Chaya's side, and then went inside again.

Their mother looked at Jamuna and said, 'Is it Chaya?'

'There, look, there's Chaya, come to see you.'

Their mother asked, 'Then who are you?'

'Amma, I'm Jamuna.'

Turning to Chaya, their mother asked, 'Then are you Chaya? Hadn't you come ealier this morning?'

'No, Amma. I came to see you yesterday. Look, Jamuna has come to sẽe you today.'

'Yesterday? But wasn't it the day before yesterday that you came?'

'Amma, no,' began Chaya. Then, 'Yes, yes,' she agreed.

'What's the matter with you two girls? Where have you both been? You don't so much as bother to come and see me.'

'Amma, aren't we both here now?'

Their mother began to wheeze. At this moment, their aunt came to them from the inner rooms of the house. 'Well girls, when did you arrive?' she asked.

'We've just come, maami. Just this minute,' said Jamuna.

'Why didn't you let me know that you were coming here this morning? I'd have cooked something for you as well when I was cooking for the children.'

'Please don't bother, maami. I have to go to the office anyway,' said Chaya.

A young man, perhaps seventeen or eighteen years old, came out now, still wearing a pair of striped pyjamas and saying, 'Mother, are you going to serve me my rice, or aren't you?'

'It's only eight in the morning, why are you asking for rice now,' their aunt said.

Jamuna had turned her face away. But Chaya looked at the boy and greeted him by name, 'Ranga'.

Without taking a step towards her he said, 'Oh, when did you come?'

They could hear someone calling from the backyard. Their aunt said, 'I'll get along then. I have any amount of work waiting to be done.' As she moved off, she said, 'Oi, Ranga, come along with me.' Ranga immediately followed her inside.

Their mother muttered something as she lay there in bed and tried to shift herself. Jamuna turned back the sheet that covered her. The older woman continued to mutter, 'mm . . . mm'. Beneath her bloated body there was a length of sacking, wet through and smelling. Jamuna held her mother gently and raised her up into a sitting position. Their mother sat up, breathing heavily. Chaya stood to one side, watching her. Jamuna went out to look for her uncle. 'Maama, where do you keep Amma's clothes?' she asked.

'Must be somewhere here. Ask your maami. Otherwise ask Shashi, she'll get them out for you.'

Jamuna returned to the verandah. Their mother was leaning against Chaya now. Somewhat hesitantly Jamuna approached the entrance to the rooms beyond that verandah. As if sensing that hesitancy instantly, a voice came towards them. 'Just stand back. Don't come any nearer.'

'Are you here then, Paati.'

'Where else would I be? Don't come inside. Wait out there.'

'Where are all mother's saris and things?'

'Oh, so you've come for your mother's saris, have you? Get out girl.'

Jamuna did not move. Their grandmother, having stared at her balefully for a while, called out, 'Janaki! Hey, Janaki!'

From within the house, their aunt called back, 'What is it, Amma?'

'Here's this creature pestering me. She seems to want something.'

'Why do you keep on after me in the early morning when I've got my hands full? I have to drain the rice and pack everyone off to

their schools and offices, haven't I?' grumbled their aunt as she came out once again. 'What is it you want now?' she asked Jamuna.

'I want a sari for my mother,' said Jamuna.

'In just a little while Sankaramma will be here to do all that is necessary. Just don't bother everyone right now.' Their aunt went back inside.

Jamuna returned to her mother. She was now sitting up by herself. 'Ask them to give Murali a bhajji, won't you?' she said.

'I'll do that, Amma.'

'Does anyone go and soak gram in order to make bhajjis? Your grandmother soaked two whole measures of gram and told me to sit down and grind all of it. I was only a little girl then. It wasn't quite four months since I had come to live in my husband's house. The old woman soaked two measures of gram and told me to grind the lot. Your father didn't open his mouth. Nor did your aunts. Two measures of gram. The mortar and grindstone together were half as tall as I was. Grind the entire lot, she told me. Two measures of gram altogether. I couldn't even move the stone around when I sat down to do it. So I had to stand up the whole time. Your father didn't once open his mouth. Neither your aunts nor your grandfather so much as spoke one word for me. All of two measures of gram.'

'Amma, will you just move a little? I'll take away this sacking.'

'But if you take it away, there's only a rubber sheet underneath. He bought me a rubber sheet when you were born. Then your grandmother immediately took away half of it. I didn't have any other clothes or anything for you. I used to wash you and put you down right against that cold rubber sheet. I used to beg them for some pieces of cloth. Nobody was prepared to give me any. I had to use my own saris and fold them up for nappies. And how can a two-month-old baby manage on one or two nappies? They'd get wet promptly. Nobody would give me any more pieces of cloth. The baby used to lie there, sopping wet.'

Jamuna went to stand behind her mother, and held her by her shoulders. 'Chaya, just pull away the sacking,' she said.

'Why are you trying to lift me, girl? Don't lift me, Jamuna.

Sankaramma will change my clothes once she has come and swept the house. Do you know, I once ground all of two measures of gram, standing up the whole time.'

Their grandmother came towards the verandah, having finished her prayers. She was a thin woman, her entire body withered. 'I want to know how you two set foot in this house without even asking me.'

Their mother said to the old lady, 'Amma, she soaked two measures of gram and asked me to make bhajjis. Will anyone soak gram to make bhajjis? I ground all that, standing up to do it. Not a soul came near me. My hands were swollen at the end.'

'You children can get out. You come here and stir up the woman when she is lying there quietly, and then stand about just to watch the fun. Now that she has started bewailing her lot, she won't shut up for the rest of the day. Get off and mind your own affairs. What place have bitches who wander about the town in decent homes?'

As soon as their Paati began to shout like this, Ranga came out again. 'Please don't start anything, Paati. Why do you have to bother about who comes and who goes?'

'And who are you to give me advice? Chi, get out.'

'And are you just going to stay here, shouting at everyone to get out?'

By this time both their uncle and aunt had come to join them. Their uncle said, 'What is the matter, Amma?' Meanwhile, their aunt burst out, 'I have to put up with this every single day. All right, it is my duty to look after you. I have to cook your mother's food and serve it to her. But if you then bring your sister and her family here and invite them all to make themselves at home, what is to happen to me? Each person has their own place, and ought to stay there; that's the only right way. And is it just for a day or two? How can you expect me to slave away for them, for years together? Just tell me how much longer it is going to be, and I'll shut up.'

Their uncle said, 'Go inside. I tell you, just go inside now.'

'I'm going, I'm going. Just watch me go. I'll go away once and for all. And then you can watch my children dart from one street to the next, begging for a handful of rice.'

Jamuna's mother said, 'Yes, my dear. I darted off like that too. I

ground two measures of gram, standing up the whole time, and didn't even get a mouthful of bhajji at the end of it.'

'Don't, mother. It's really upsetting you,' Jamuna said.

Their uncle asked, 'Where have you put all her clothes? How long is she to lie in this dreadful state, long after the night is done?'

Their aunt went indoors, muttering angrily. After some time, Ranga followed her. A little later still, Shashi brought out a sari and gave it to Jamuna. Their uncle now came towards the two sisters. Instantly Paati asked, 'Where are all the flowers you gathered, son?'

'I've left them all outside.'

'What do you mean, you've left them outside?'

'Amma, you go and take them.'

'Don't go and fall on top of these people after you have had a wretched bath and everything.'

'I haven't had a wretched bath.'

'Oh, get lost, do whatever you like.'

After their Grandmother had left, their uncle looked at Jamuna and Chaya with a grim expression. 'We have to come to some decision. Sometimes I think it's not possible for me to live here even a moment more.'

Chaya began to cry. Jamuna said, 'Don't cry. Don't cry.'

Their mother too, joined in. 'Are you crying? There's no use at all in crying, girl. If you keep on crying, how will the work get done? That maharani soaked two measures of gram and asked me to grind the lot. I had to stand the whole time and do it.'

Their uncle said, 'Who can we blame now.' After a while he asked, 'Are you going to change your mother's sari?'

Their mother shifted again, slightly. The answer to his question lay in the unbearable state of the bed. He lifted Jamuna's mother a little, standing behind her shoulders. Jamuna peeled away the sari and removed it together with the sacking. She wiped her mother's waist and thighs. Swiftly Chaya wrapped the fresh sari around their mother. Then the older woman fell back heavily, on to the bed.

'Let her sleep for a while. You two come with me to the front verandah.' Jamuna and Chaya followed their uncle.

'You see in what a condition your mother is,' he said.

'Mm,' Jamuna agreed. Then, 'How long is it since she began to talk in this incoherent way? She wasn't like this, last time I came.'

'And how many months is it since this last time you speak of? You sound as if you come to visit her every day.'

'I didn't mean anything, maama. I'm asking this because now Amma seems as if she is not aware of anything that is going on.'

Their uncle was quiet for some time. Then he said, 'I feel it is not going to be very long now.' Neither Jamuna nor Chaya could say anything to that.

'It might be a good idea if we made a settlement very soon, while your mother is still alive.'

'Is it necessary to have a written settlement?' asked Chaya.

'Even if you two don't want that, any day now the men you marry will be here, demanding your portion of our property. I could arrange things with you both informally, but when there is a third person it all becomes more of a problem.'

'We'll do whatever you think best, maama.'

'I'll write out the deeds separately for each of you. Sign them and return them to me. It is best to do it all while your mother is alive.'

'Have you spoken to Amma?'

'What good will it do now to speak to her? Yet we cannot arrange anything if we leave her out.'

'We don't understand any of this, maama. But we do know that if you take the responsibility, you will only have our good in mind.'

'My mother – your Paati, that is – is absolutely determined that you two shouldn't get a single penny piece of the property. I know that isn't right. Once your mother too has gone, your grandmother is likely to have her way entirely. You know your Paati's nature very well.'

'She seems to feel that we are her bitter enemies.'

'Your Paati wants everyone to be as I am – always prepared to listen to her and do what she wants. You two can't be like that, it isn't possible. After all, I am sixty years old now.'

Chaya and Jamuna were silent.

'When will you come again? Can you stay and eat with us today?'

'No thank you, maama, we have to go. Or at least, I have to go. Akka, you stay if you like.'

'Don't take it to heart if your maami says anything. I can't do everything for your mother myself. She needs a woman to look after her. In the end it's your maami who does whatever she can.'

'Please maama, be kind to Murali for just a few more days. I'll take him away with me very soon.'

'It looks as if it is going to rain. The earth has cooled off a little because of the rain these past four or five days.'

'Yes, maama.'

Ranga came out, ready to go off to his college. Jamuna and Chaya both stepped aside, allowing him to go past. He went out without even glancing in their direction. A little later, Shashi came out. She looked at Chaya and Jamuna, smiled very slightly and then went on her way to school. Murali came outside following Shashi. This time Chaya did not rush to gather him up.

Just as Shashi was stepping out into the street, their uncle called out from the verandah, 'Don't you want to take an umbrella with you?' She pulled a face meaning no, she didn't, and ran away.

'Well, come inside and sit for a little before you go,' he invited them. Chaya and Jamuna returned indoors. Their mother was eating a soup-like mixture of rice and rasam. She looked at them and said, 'Would you like some bhajji, girls?'

From the backyard, at that instant a voice called out, 'Here, just come out here, please.' Maama, Jamuna and Chaya hurried together towards the back of the house. Their aunt was screaming because Paati had slipped and fallen by the side of the well.

* * *

The woman woke up. As she shook off her covering, her bangles gave a slight jingle. Immediately her husband asked, 'Is it raining?'

The steady tap-tapping sound of the rain on the roof top made her answer unnecessary. All the same, she said, 'Yes.'

Husband and wife both got out of bed now. He asked her, 'Will you light the lamp?'

Although she was half asleep, she found the box of matches without too much fumbling and lit a small lamp. The husband took up an umbrella.

Hastily, the wife found a couple of tin containers. They were empty kerosene-oil containers. She had bought them for four and a half rupees, after much bargaining.

The husband opened the door and went out, his umbrella in one hand and the two tin containers in the other. By now, the rain was beating down hard. He went along, following the side walls of the house closely, looking for a particular spot. That part of the house had a beamed ceiling with a flat roof above, and a long pipe to drain off the rain water which fell upon the terrace. As soon as it began to rain rather more heavily, the water gushed out of the over-flow pipe in a steady stream.

He placed one of his tins immediately beneath this stream. Rain drops as well as the water from the pipe clattered down into the container, at once raising a loud din. Then the noise diminished as soon as a little water began to accumulate.

He picked up the other tin and made his way to the other side of the house. But by that time someone else had placed their vessel underneath the overflow pipe there.

With the rain pouring off the ribs of his umbrella, he returned to his rooms. Immediately his wife asked, 'Why couldn't you leave this one somewhere as well?'

'I was only able to find a place for one of the tins.'

'It must be full by now. Go and fetch it.'

He hesitated for a moment. Then he opened his umbrella and started out again.

'While you are about it, why don't you take this one along as well? When you bring that tin away, you could put this one in its place.'

'Go and get rid of it yourself.' He flung his umbrella towards the tin. Being already open, it fell elsewhere, swaying a little.

The woman stared at her husband for a moment. Then picking up both umbrella and container herself, she set off into the

darkness. Not knowing where he had put the first container, she went in the opposite direction, towards the spot where someone else had placed their vessel. Very soon she was sodden up to her knees and it was difficult for her to hold her umbrella properly. Pulling her sari tightly about her, she tucked it in firmly at the waist and struggled on. By this time, the water was pouring out from the pipe. Although it was still dark, she could see very clearly. The vessel that had been placed there by someone else was half full. Her eyes swept about her once, swiftly. Then she emptied the water from the other vessel into her own container. Replacing the vessel she made her way to the other side of the house, holding on to her tin. By this time she was even more drenched.

There were two or three buckets lined up at the place where her husband had left his tin. An old man went past carrying a bucket of rain water, with just a piece of folded cloth protecting his head. Before she could replace the now full kerosene tin with her other half empty one, an older woman complained, 'Look, if you help yourself to all the water there is, what are the rest of us to do?' Saying this, she stopped her from filling the second kerosene tin right to the top.

By the time she arrived at their own rooms, one tin in either hand, and the umbrella held at the crook of her neck, she was wet through. Her husband had gone back to bed. She put down both her tins in a corner of the room and tried to wring out the clothes that she was wearing. Realizing, however, that this made very little difference, she turned down the lamp, removed the sari that she was wearing, took out a fresh one and began to put it on. Once she sneezed, unable to suppress it.

Her husband turned over in his sleep. Once again she sneezed. He got up in a fury, took hold of her and shook her hard. 'Is your whole lineage going to come to an end if you don't go out in this rain and fetch just a drop of water? If you go down with fever or whatever tomorrow, who do you think is going to throw away money to the doctor?'

'You are not going to lose anything, don't worry. I just thought if I collect a bit of water while its there, I might at least be able to

rinse out a couple of clothes. After all it is I who have to sit at home and put up with all the vexation.'

He went back and lay down without bothering to reply. Gradually the rain slackened off. Then it ceased. They both relaxed. The light still burned low.

Suddenly it started to come down again with great force. The woman sat up with a sudden start. Her husband grumbled, 'What is it now?'

'If we manage to collect just one more tin of water, we can manage for a whole day.'

'Don't fuss about all that. Just lie there quietly.'

The rain was falling very heavily now. It was becoming impossible for her just to lie there. The man asked her, 'But aren't you getting water from the tank?'

'Once in three days. And anyway, one has to put up with a lot of humiliation there. Really, nothing will happen to me. I'll go and fill up just one more tin.'

'No, don't do it. I'll go myself. It's been raining hard for the past ten days now. Yet you still don't see a single drop in any of the taps.' He got ready to go, carrying the umbrella and one of the containers.

'Why not empty out the other one and take it with you, just in case,' his wife said.

'Oh, go and do it yourself then,' he shouted in a fury, throwing down both tin and umbrella so that they fell on to the floor with a great thud.

'Who is asking you to go, anyway? I can go and fetch the water myself. After all I've been doing it for months together. I can do it myself for a few more days,' she said, setting off.

When she arrived at the water spout with her tins and her umbrella, she saw another form there already.

'Who is it?' she asked.

'It's me.'

'Jamuna, is it?'

'Yes.'

'Why have you started to come here? Can't you collect the rain water in your own place?'

'How can I, maami? I have to fight with about ten people there. I came here because there was no one about. Look, I've finished now. Put your container down here.'

Jamuna lifted her water pot and placed it on the wall that separated one house from the next. She was completely wet through. She called out, 'Chaya, Chaya.'

'How will she hear you through this rain? I'm standing right next to you and even then I can't hear you properly.'

The rain was pelting down almost with violence now. Both kerosene tins had filled up. 'How will you manage to get home? How long will you stand there in the rain, getting soaked?'

'Please will you hold this water pot like this for a minute? I'll just climb over the wall and take it from the other side.'

'Did you jump over the wall to get here?'

'What else can I do, maami? The front of our house is all dug up, you can't tell where you'll end if you put a foot down. There's no street light either. What else can I do in the darkness and the rain?'

* * *

This time the workmen were digging with extreme care. Crowbars did not appear to be in use. They were shifting the earth which had turned into mud and slush at the bottom of the trench and using their shovels to spread it on the street. The tarmac surface which had dried out just a little was gradually becoming covered with a kind of muddy paste. As the people walked along it, their clothes were spattered with the particles of mud that their sandals threw up.

A man wearing khaki trousers and shirt came riding his cycle towards them. One of the men shovelling mud called out, 'Have you cut off the supply?' The cyclist showed them a china-ware fuse.

This time, none of the people living in the street came anywhere near the workmen. They went about as usual minding their own business. Nowadays, it didn't matter who it was who carried a water pot or a bucket, it seemed appropriate enough.

It was only the children who seemed at all able to take in the

changes that were happening in their surroundings. They made paper boats and floated them wherever enough water had collected in the trench that stretched along the street.

Vehicles moved with great caution now. The khaki clad man who had come by on his bicycle made his appearance again after another trip elsewhere. He said, 'Mind what you are doing this time, my friends. Don't go and cut the cable as the other men did.'

One of the men threw up a shovelful of earth on to the street. Something gleamed through the muddy heap. He picked it up and looked at it. An old enamel bangle. He flung it far away and began to shovel once more.

A jeep drew up at the end of the street, just at that moment. A man who looked as if he was a minor official of some sort climbed out of the jeep and came up to the workmen. As soon as he saw him, the man in khaki ran up towards him and saluted smartly. The officer asked, 'Well, have you managed to trace it?'

'The cable has been cut in seven or eight places altogether, sir. All these five posts have to have their cables checked completely.'

'And why have you not done it all this while, man? It is fifteen days now since the supply has stopped. Have you people been asleep or what?

'Sir, what can we do by ourselves? If the overseer tells us to do something, of course we'll do it. But he has been saying that he doesn't have any of the necessary parts. It seems that none of the goods that he put in an indent for have arrived.'

'And where is he?'

'He said he was just going to the temple. He'll be here soon. Anyway these fellows have to finish digging.'

The officer left them and walked away along the street. He went along, scrutinizing the house numbers, and eventually came to a stop in front of a particular house. The owner of the house happened to be standing by his front door at the time. For a while the two stood as they were, staring across at each other. Then the house-owner came towards his gate with an expression that asked, 'What do you want?'

'Are you Mr Vedachalam?' the officer asked. The trench stretched between him and the house-owner.

'Yes, what is it?'

'What is the matter with you, sir? If there are no lights on your street, is it necessary to write to the Minister?'

'What are you talking about?'

'This is a City Corporation matter, sir. Do you have to take every trivial matter to the Minister? Do you think it is his business to come and look after your street lights?'

'I just don't know what you are talking about, I'm afraid. Can you tell me who you are?'

'Assistant Engineering Officer, South. If you had just gone down to the sub-station right by the cinema here, and said a word to them, they would have come running along and seen to your street lights. Instead you go and write to the Minister himself as if you are the only person who knows how to lodge a complaint.'

'Oh, you have come to see to our street lights, have you? It's been a whole month . . .'

'Why do you have to exaggerate so much, sir? How can it be a month? Haven't we got a daily chart with us? It is true there hasn't been a supply for six days. And clearly that was because of a cable fault.'

'Do you know that so far there have been nearly a hundred vehicles – carts, lorries, auto-rickshaws and even a bus – that have slid into that trench in the dark? To my knowledge, there have been four cases of fractured limbs. Impossible to count the number of people who have hurt themselves or sprained arms and legs. When there is such a dangerous open trench, and not even street lights for people to see by, how did you expect us to manage?'

'You could easily have telephoned the sub-station.'

'Forget about the telephone. I have complained in person, at least ten times. We know perfectly well that it is a Corporation matter. But it is only the complaint to the Minister that has brought you here the very next day.'

'You people are supposed to be the educated public. Yet you are the very ones who refuse to understand our difficulties and make a major issue out of a trivial matter.'

'What do you call a major issue, tell me? For months together we have no water. Then you dig these holes and leave them like

that without closing them properly. Now there is no street light either.'

'Sir, all this has happened because of the trench. The Water-works Department employed a number of unskilled temporary workers to dig up and change the water pipes. These fellows have no idea of watching out for the cables or anything like that. Wherever they have replaced the water mains, they have ruined the cables.'

'Oho, is that why the street lights have gone? But how is it that we have lights in the houses then?'

'That's because of overhead wires. If those had been under-ground as well, you can be sure they'd have gone too.'

Two men had shovelled out the mud from half the length of the trench. Their overseer returned from the temple. But it did not turn out to be a very auspicious day for him. The jeep returned and the officer climbed into it once more and drove off. Vedachalam, displaying a sudden interest in what the workmen were doing, came up to talk to the overseer.

'Do you expect to have finished by this evening?'

'We'll have to see, sir . . . Oi, be careful and shovel it properly. Take that big stone away first.'

When the overseer and the man dressed in khaki had both moved some distance away, Vedachalam asked the men who were still digging, 'What sort of wages do you get?'

'What do you mean, wages? We are hired by the day.'

'And why is that?'

'All of us here are only temporary workmen, sir.'

* * *

'Chaya, Chaya,' called Jamuna, attempting to wake her. Chaya turned over in her sleep, then turned over a second time and sat up. Then she lay down once again.

'Isn't it getting late for you? It's nearly seven. Get up.'

Chaya pulled up her coverlet and wrapped it tightly about her. 'I'm not going to the office today,' she said.

Jamuna asked anxiously, 'Why, aren't you feeling well?' She pulled away the coverlet and placed a hand on Chaya's forehead.

'There's nothing wrong with me. I've just decided not to go. There's no particular reason.'

'Goodness, you gave me quite a fright. But actually, it would be quite a good thing if you didn't go to the office today. Do you know how I'm going to do the cooking?'

Without much enthusiasm, Chaya asked, 'How?'

'In the new cooker.'

'Oh, I see.'

'Very well, you get up when you want to. I'll make some fresh tea when you are ready.'

Chaya sat up abruptly. 'Have you made tea for me as well?'

'Why yes, just as I do it everyday.'

'Very well, then, I'll join you straight away.'

Having brushed her teeth, Chaya sat leaning against the wall, her knees drawn up. Jamuna handed her a cup. When she had finished, she placed the cup beside her on the floor, but continued to sit where she was, a vacant look in her eyes.

'You seem to be in a strange state of mind since yesterday,' Jamuna said to her.

'Really?'

'Yes, really,' Jamuna said.

Chaya heaved a great sigh, but said nothing.

'Is anything the matter?' Jamuna asked her.

'Oh it's nothing,' Chaya said. Then, a little later, 'I had a letter yesterday.'

'From whom? Did it come here for you? But I was at home all day.'

'It came to the office.' Chaya got up and went to open her handbag. She took a letter out of it and brought it to Jamuna. It was an inland letter of the kind that only people in the army use. It was marked with the letters APO and a number that followed.

Jamuna unfolded the letter. It was from Chaya's husband. He had not got the transfer that he had applied for, and which he had hoped so much to get. He could not be certain now when he would

get it. All that could be said with certainty was that they would not be able to live together as a family that year in Madras.

Without saying a word, Jamuna returned the letter to Chaya. Chaya took it and sank down on the floor. She began to sob.

In one bound Jamuna came and sat by Chaya's side and put her arm around her shoulders. 'What is this, Chaya? Now you are giving way too. Did you learn to cry from me?'

Chaya continued to weep. 'Chaya, Chaya,' said Jamuna, holding her tightly. 'Don't cry. Don't cry. How can you be so weak?'

But Chaya could not stop. Jamuna lifted up Chaya's face and wiped her eyes. Chaya said, 'Akka,' and put her arms about her sister. Jamuna patted Chaya's back. She kept saying, 'Don't cry, my dear. Don't cry.' At last, after some time, Chaya stopped crying. She turned her gaze elsewhere, as if she was too embarrassed even to meet Jamuna's eyes. Jamuna called, 'Chaya.' Chaya would not answer.

'Right. That's enough. Get up now. We'll continue to live as we have been doing for a little longer. He has only written to say it is not possible for him to come just now. But he might, after all, be posted here quite suddenly, in a couple of months. Come on, get up.'

'I was so certain he would come, Akka,' said Chaya. She was about to start crying again, but Jamuna held on to her firmly and she managed to control herself.

'We can be certain of nothing, not even of our own bodies, do you know that?' Jamuna observed. Chaya looked at her without comprehension.

As if changing the subject, Jamuna said, 'I said that because there is nothing that we can hope for with absolute confidence. Get up and have your bath. We'll talk after you have had some breakfast. After all, nothing has been finally determined today. Isn't there such a thing as tomorrow? Come, get up.'

Chaya stood up, a little more tranquil now. With a smile that betrayed her sadness she said, 'I've preached at you so much, haven't I? In the end, none of it has been of any use to me in my own life.'

'Now you are really being silly. I too have a number of things to weep about. But let's be happy just for today. We'll go and see Murali after breakfast. We might even take him with us to the beach. It is a good thing you decided not to go to your office.'

'It's all exactly as before.'

'Yes. As it was before. But how can it remain exactly the same? Whether we want it or not, things will change as they must.'

Jamuna took down the vegetable basket and turned out the potatoes and onions that it contained. Four cockroaches fell out of the basket and scuttled off in different directions. A tremendous shout came from the vicinity of the downstairs tap. The son of the landlord was calling out, 'Amma, come here. Just come here. Look how the water is gushing out.' He was working the pump as if he was possessed, not even noticing that his veshti was in disarray. And the water was pouring out of the tap.

* * *

Within two minutes there were fifteen people crowding around the pump.

'Hey, was it reported in the newspapers that we would get water in the taps today?' one man asked.

Nobody answered that question. The landlord's son was working the pump forcefully and it made a loud cranking sound. Water gushed out plentifully, but it was turbid, mixed with rust. Very soon it was spreading over the ground surrounding the pump and running off in little streams.

His little sister pleaded, 'Let me have a go, let me do it for a little while.' Their mother said to her, 'What are you doing here? You run off and fetch a bucket or vessel of some sort.'

By this time one of the tenants had arrived there with a large water pot. The landlady said, 'You can all wait for a little. After all, the water has just begun to flow. Son, don't leave off now. Tell me if your arm begins to ache.'

But it seemed that on that day his arm was not going to feel the least strain. He kept on at it without showing any signs of weariness. On the contrary, the water flooding out seemed to give

him more and more strength. He said, 'Place your water pot here, maama. We'll fill it by the time she returns with the bucket.'

'Oh no, it will take a whole day's pumping to fill that thing . . . please stand back a little . . . Oi, what's the matter girl, why are you taking such a long time?'

'You just bring your water pot, maama, this water is being spilt uselessly.'

Within seconds of his placing the water pot under the tap, the landlady's bucket had arrived. The water pot was shifted to one side.

The next-door neighbour's window shutter opened with a sharp sound. A woman's voice was heard from that direction, asking, 'Is there water in the taps?' Following that came the sound of the water pump being worked in that house. Soon after that, in all the houses – the one on the other side, the one opposite, the one with the terraced roof, the one with the verandah at an angle, the one with the thatched shed – people began to work their pumps once more. And indeed there was water in all the houses.

Jamuna and Chaya too had come downstairs, and stood next to the water tap, gazing wide-eyed at the water gushing out, scarcely able to believe what they saw. Jamuna said to Chaya, 'Do you know, if the Supreme Lord himself should come visiting us today, we'd say to him, please wait in the verandah for a moment, I'll just go and have a good look at the water flowing out of the taps.'

Chaya said in reply, 'But as for me, what difficulties did I suffer when there was no water? I left it entirely to you to bear the brunt of it.'

The initial enthusiasm of the landlord's son diminished a little, and he now handed over the pump to someone else. His mother, having carried the water inside, came out and asked, 'Is there a slight stench about the water?'

One of the tenants said, 'It is flowing through the taps for the first time in many months. There's bound to be a slight smell.'

'No, no. This is like the stench of sewage. Try it, boy.'

Her son cupped both hands to collect the water flowing out of the tap and carried it to his lips. At once he spat it out. 'It's certainly very peculiar.'

'What do you mean, peculiar? Let me try.' His sister put a little of it into her mouth. She too spat and said, 'Chi.'

'What is it?' asked her brother.

'Definitely smells of urine,' she said. She kept retching and spitting out after that, her entire body signalling her revulsion.

One of the women called out to the people living next door, 'Is the water that is coming out of your taps all right? Does it smell at all?'

The woman from next door answered, 'I've just had a bath in this water. It seemed all right to me.'

'Did you try drinking it?'

'No. Why? What is the matter now?'

'Just please try and see.'

After a minute the woman from next door said, 'It has a funny brackish taste.'

'Isn't there a smell of sewage?'

Another minute later the same woman said, 'Ayyo, yes it's true. There's a terrible smell all right. I've gone and poured this filthy stuff on my head.'

The water was still pouring out, the strench quite apparent to everybody now; there was no longer any need to test it. The man with the water pot, by this time three quarters full, simply upturned it then and there. The landlord's son asked him, 'Why do you have to pour it all out here making the entire place filthy. Couldn't you have taken it to the backyard?'

'And why do I have to carry away just this much water and pour it out? Haven't you made the place filthy enough before I did?'

The pumping came to a stop. It was established that somewhere the water pipes and the drainage pipes had been mixed and it was indeed sewage water that was coming out in the water taps of some seven or eight houses there. When the same thing had happened some years ago, it had taken all of two days to set it right. By that time five people were suffering from hepatitis and jaundice. Jamuna's landlord's son set off to the Corporation offices to lodge his complaint, even though he knew he would be late arriving at his own office.

Jamuna said, 'I suppose the tap-water will flush out the sewage water in the end.'

'And the Supreme Lord has to wait in the verandah until that happens too,' Chaya answered. Jamuna laughed as she went towards the staircase, followed by Chaya. And there stood Bhaskar Rao.

* * *

When they saw Bhaskar Rao, both Jamuna and Chaya stood absolutely still for a moment, shocked. All of a sudden, Bhaskar Rao appeared a shade less eager, as if he had not anticipated Chaya's presence there. It was Jamuna who regained her composure in a minute and said, 'Come. Come up. When did you arrive?'

Chaya appeared transformed by a hard anger. Jamuna took her hand and held it tightly.

'Have you been waiting long?' Jamuna asked again.

Bhaskar Rao had regained possession of his customary manner. 'About five minutes. I glanced at the yard. Quite a crowd at the tap. Looks as if you've got water.'

'Oh yes. After five or six months, just this moment, suddenly there's water in the taps.'

Chaya looked at Bhaskar Rao and said, 'Sewage water'. Immediately after that she turned her gaze away, elsewhere.

Bhaskar Rao, not comprehending, asked, 'What do you mean?'

'It appears that at first it was drainage water that was coming out of our taps. But all that will be put right. The main thing is that we've got water at last. Come, let's go upstairs.'

Chaya made an attempt to free her hand from Jamuna's hold, intending to go away from there. But Jamuna held on firmly and started to climb the stairs. Bhaskar Rao followed behind. Chaya pulled at her sari-pallav and draped it over herself to cover her back completely.

As soon as they reached their room, Jamuna was forced to let go of Chaya's hand in order to pull a chair forward for Bhaskar Rao.

Chaya immediately said, 'I'm off.'

Jamuna asked, 'Where to?'

'Anywhere. I'll go anywhere,' said Chaya. But as if she herself realized that she should not have said that, she hesitated a moment.

Quick to take advantage of that moment, Jamuna said, 'Chaya, wait. Wait just a minute. Hadn't we planned to go out together?' Chaya went to a corner and sat down upon a trunk.

Certain in the knowledge that Chaya would not throw him even the merest glance, Bhaskar Rao gestured towards Jamuna, 'If she wants to go out, why not let her?'

Jamuna, taking no notice of his signals, said, 'Do sit down. Would you like some tea?' Bhaskar Rao looked nonplussed for a moment. Then he sat down on the chair. Jamuna went towards the stove to make the tea.

Chaya intercepted her saying, 'Let me do it. I'd like some myself, anyway.' Jamuna left the stove and returned to Bhaskar Rao's side.

'I came because I need to speak to you privately,' said Bhaskar Rao.

'Very well, speak to me now,' said Jamuna.

'If ever I come here, your sister acts as if a murderer has turned up,' said Bhaskar Rao. Jamuna did not reply. Although Chaya looked as if she would explode at any moment, not a sound escaped from her either. Bhaskar Rao alone spoke, gaining more confidence. 'I've bought a car.'

'When? Is it a new one?' asked Jamuna.

'Almost like new. Because of the work that I did for Krishna Movies, there was something like fifteen thousand rupees owing to me for the brokerage. Now the company has had to close. So I took the car.'

A muttered sound seemed to come from Chaya. Bhaskar Rao said, 'What is it?'

'Nothing,' said Jamuna, going towards Chaya. She poured out a cup from the tea that Chaya had prepared and handed it to Bhaskar Rao. At once he took a sip, burning his lip. Tears stung his eyes. Jamuna waited, looking intently at Bhaskar Rao. He met her gaze once, then busied himself, blowing upon his tea to cool it,

and then drinking it slowly. When he lifted up his head again and looked up, she was still watching him.

'I came because I wanted to talk to you,' said Bhaskar Rao.

'I too thought – oh, about a week or ten days ago – that it might not be a bad idea if we met. Well, what did you want to tell me?'

Bhaskar Rao threw a look towards Chaya.

'It's all right. You can say what you like. I don't have any secrets from her.'

'A good opportunity has just come up,' said Bhaskar Rao.

'What do you mean?'

'This Madhusudan Rao of Krishna Movies is organizing a new company. He is a sound party to work with. All the shooting is going to be done in Hyderabad. They want to remake *Badi Behn* in Telugu. It's the same film that Nasu Studios made some time ago. Now Madhusudan says he wants to give you the role of the second female lead.'

Chaya had forgotten about her self-control, her eyes were darting rapidly in turn from Bhaskar Rao to Jamuna.

'All these days I have tried my best to find an acting part for you. What standing would I have if I couldn't even manage to get you the role of the supporting heroine?'

'Are you telling me that they will actually cast me in such a role?' Jamuna asked. Having said that, she walked up to the small mirror which hung on their wall. It reflected back to her the wavy hair that framed her face. The six waves that at one time fell naturally from her parting to her ears had diminished to four. Her hair was more limp than before. It was thinner. It had even receded a little. Her cheekbones stood out clearly on either side of her face. There were tiny wrinkles beneath her eyes. Hereafter she could not hope for the firmness of flesh that would hide all that. And whatever her photographs managed to hide or make plain, her teeth would undoubtedly reveal their length. However much Madhusudan might be prepared to help her, he was not going to allow her to ruin his film by giving her a place in it. What did she possess now, other than her face? Jamuna bent her head to look at herself.

'Are you telling me the truth?' she asked.

'How can you ask me that?' Bhaskar Rao began to bluster. 'I came now because I wanted to take you straight away and have a couple of stills done.'

'I don't wish to go,' said Jamuna.

'I know you are thinking of the last three or four occasions when it all came to nothing. But it won't be like that this time. I am a partner in this production. That makes it completely different.'

'No thank you. I don't want any of it any more.'

'Why, what has happened to you all of a sudden?'

'You need a particular kind of enthusiasm for all that. Even a kind of daring. I might have had it earlier. I can't be confident that I have it now.'

'What's the matter with you? You are talking in a very strange way. Just forget about all that and come with me now. It seems that all this breast beating and searching for water has affected your mind oddly.'

Chaya watched Jamuna intently. Her whole attitude called out that if Jamuna were to go out with Bhaskar Rao now, her relationship with her sister would end. And Bhaskar Rao, for his part, sat there, looking slightly flustered, his usual self-confidence somewhat diminished.

'No thank you. I really don't want it either now or at any time hereafter. And there is one reason above all else why that is so.'

'And what's that?'

'I'm three months gone.'

* * *

'Jamuna,' called Chaya, addressing her sister directly by her name. Bhaskar Rao looked as if he could not quite believe what he was hearing.

'What are you saying?' said Chaya.

'Oh yes. I have no doubt about it now.'

'Ayyayyo, you absolute wretch,' said Chaya, turning towards Bhaskar Rao.

'Look here, look here. Don't jump on me,' blustered Bhaskar Rao in some agitation.

'Dishonourable wretch, just look at what you have done to my sister.' Chaya seized the rolled up umbrella that was propped up against a corner.

'Chaya, you be quiet,' said Jamuna.

'Why should I be quiet? I should break this liar's skull and kill him.'

Bhaskar Rao stood up in fear and surprise.

'Be quiet, Chaya,' Jamuna rebuked her. Then she spoke to Bhaskar Rao, 'Please leave now. Please go away.'

'You are asking him to go away are you? Do you think I'm going to let him get away?' Saying this, Chaya leapt forward to stand in front of the door. She kicked the door shut behind her. 'Find a way to help her, man,' she said.

As if aware that he was indeed forced to say something, Bhaskar Rao spoke. 'What is there to say? I'll find out where to take her.'

'And then?' demanded Chaya, hectoring.

'I'll make it all right.'

Chaya raised her umbrella. 'You'll make it all right, will you? All right, will it be?'

'What else can I do? Can I bear the child?'

'Rascal,' said Chaya again, lunging at Bhaskar Rao. In one bound Jamuna reached Chaya and held her, preventing the umbrella from falling on Bhaskar Rao. Bhaskar Rao moved towards the door. Freeing herself from Jamuna's hold, Chaya rushed forward and bolted it.

By this time, Bhaskar Rao was in a state of fury. Turning to Jamuna he said, 'Look here, it's not so easy to frighten me by this sort of bullying. There are at least fifty people like you who have tried such tactics. It cuts no ice with me. I'm warning you.'

Jamuna said, 'Chaya, just be still a minute.' But Chaya was still seething.

Calming himself down a little, Bhaskar Rao said, 'When you ask me to find a way, what else can I do?'

'What else? Why, get married to her properly, in front of a few witnesses.'

Bhaskar Rao laughed. 'Yes, I'll marry her. After that, your sister and I will find ourselves being dragged off to prison. My wife

is certainly not going to bring us any food there. It will be up to you.'

'Are you throwing the law at me?' said Chaya. But she was quiet after that, not able to think any further.

'These things happen, you know. I'll have to do the best I can, in whatever way I can,' said Bhaskar Rao, trying to pacify her.

Once more roused to a speechless fury, Chaya said 'Rascal', and thrust her umbrella forward. This time it caught him in the thigh.

Bhaskar Rao called out 'Ey' and clutched his thigh tightly. It was clearly extremely painful, although there was no open wound.

'Why are you acting like this, Chaya? Any more of this and I shall be really angry with you,' said Jamuna.

'Oh, go to hell,' said Chaya, flinging the umbrella away.

Jamuna put her hand on Bhaskar Rao's knee and asked, 'Did it hurt badly?' Bhaskar Rao shook her hand away with annoyance. Jamuna drew back, a little. Bhaskar Rao lifted his head and looked directly at Chaya and Jamuna as if he stood exactly equal to them. Jamuna said, 'Please go now. We'll see to everything later.'

Bhaskar Rao unbolted the room and went out. After he had gone, they realized that he had left behind the handkerchief that he had carefully spread upon the chair before sitting down.

Chaya looked at Jamuna with displeasure, at first. Then, very tenderly she said, 'Akka, how could you have done it?'

'What have I done?' asked Jamuna.

'You've let the wretched man off. Of course he's never going to come this way again.'

'Let him go.'

Struck by a sudden notion, Chaya stared at Jamuna. Clinging now to a mere thread of a belief, she asked, 'Akka, it was a lie you told, wasn't it? It was a lie, wasn't it? You said it in order to make him go.'

'No, Chaya, I've left off telling lies, altogether.'

'Then is it really true?'

'Oh yes.'

With a loud cry of 'Akka', Chaya came and held on to Jamuna. Jamuna patted her gently and said, 'Why are you crying?'

'What is going to happen? What are we to do?'

'What can we do? We will continue as before. You said yourself this morning that everything was just the same as before. So let us just continue to be what we are.'

'But how can it be the same?'

'We must believe that it is.'

'But Akka, how can that be? Aren't we accountable to at least three or four people? Don't we have to answer their questions?'

'So we'll answer them.'

'Akka, I can't bear it.' Again Chaya held on to Jamuna and wept. Downstairs they could hear the car refusing to start, in spite of repeated efforts to get it going. Chaya and Jamuna looked at each other, well aware of what was happening.

'I'll go and drag him here, Akka,' said Chaya.

'No, don't, don't. What will you do after you have dragged him here?'

'At least we can force him to acknowledge that he is the father of the child.'

'Can he become the father just by stating that he is one? Why do we need him to do that? Did we really have a father?'

'Jamuna, what are you talking about?'

'It's all to do with what we choose to believe, isn't it? What can we put in place of a belief that is no longer there?'

'What has happened to you? Have you gone mad?'

'Whom are we to trust? We ought to be able to trust ourselves, at least. Now, look, it seems that even that is not so easy.'

From the street they heard the sounds of the engine being revved in a desperate attempt to start the car, mixed with loud shouts of young children. Jamuna narrowed her eyes to look through her window. There was nothing at all to be seen on that part of the street that was visible. Chaya came to join her. Within a few seconds, though, they could see a car being pushed along by several children. Bhaskar Rao was seated in the car.

'How grandly he invited you to go with him in his car. It's a rotten car,' said Chaya.

Jamuna looked at her and smiled. The car moved slowly and went outside their vision.

Jamuna said, 'Poor man. The street is in a dreadful state round about here.'

'How can you feel sorry for a man like that,' said Chaya with disgust.

'Well, let that be. Let's get on with our business. Shall I cook for us today? Or shall we see to our food when we go out?'

Chaya, unable to show any enthusiasm, said, 'Let's not go out at all. I have lost all my desire to go anywhere.'

'I have a great urge to go out, though. I want to see Amma. I want to see them all, this once.'

Chaya looked at Jamuna as if yet another doubt had crossed her mind. Jamuna laughed and said, 'What is the matter, you are imagining all sorts of things, aren't you? No, I'm not going to do anything to myself. Don't worry, I shall be around until I die of old age.'

If Chaya was no nearer understanding her sister, she at least ceased to feel agitated. 'I don't know. I just don't understand you,' she said.

Once again they heard the children shouting. Jamuna looked out of the window. Now they were pushing the car from the front so that it was reversing its tracks. Bhaskar Rao's face looked black.

Chaya said, 'Even when you keep insisting he should leave, he can't actually manage it.'

Jamuna laughed. Chaya said to her, 'Perhaps you should go down and give the car a good shove.'

'Why don't you join me? We could push it together.'

Chaya laughed at last.

'Come on, let us go out. I am not going to cook at home today. Poor cooker. It's going to be very disappointed. Come, get ready.'

Chaya said, 'Neither of us has had a bath yet.'

'And why should we? Nothing very terrible is going to happen to us. We'll just wash our faces and set out.'

Chaya said, 'Very well.' Then suddenly, overcome with worry, 'Akka, what are we going to do? I am very frightened.'

'Don't imagine that I am not frightened too. But I've decided not to do anything to myself. We'll see.'

'It's all so strange. I really am frightened. How could you have

trapped yourself in this way? Ayyo, everything that I feared has actually happened now.'

Jamuna put her arms about Chaya. 'Why must you start worrying about things that are some distance away? Let us be happy at least for today, come.'

'There's maama and maami . . . I begin to see it all one by one. How they will tear you to bits! Amma, of course, is past understanding anything they tell her.'

Jamuna lifted up Chaya's face. 'Chaya, I too have thought about all that. We'll take each thing as it comes. But you'll be with me, won't you?'

Chaya took a long look at Jamuna, and then shut her brimming eyes. Jamuna wiped Chaya's cheeks. Once again they could hear the shouts from the streets. Chaya said, 'We'll set out after the street is rid of him, Akka. If we go out now, we'll only have to face him again.'

'Very well.'

* * *

Immediately, Jamuna spread a mat on the floor. 'What's this?' asked Chaya.

'I want to lie down for a little while and shut my eyes.'

Jamuna lay down and closed her eyes. When it seemed to her that a long, long time had passed since they had heard the noise of the children pushing the car, she opened her eyes at last. Chaya was standing by the window, looking out into the street.

'Well, has it gone?' asked Jamuna.

'It's still exactly the same.'

Jamuna got up. For an instant she seemed unsteady on her feet. But immediately she pulled herself together and went to wash her face. There was a little tea left in the vessel by the stove. 'Did you make tea for me too? she asked Chaya.

'Just half a tumbler. I didn't get the chance to give it to you while it was hot.'

'So what? This tea is good even if it is cold.' Jamuna drank down the tea, cold as tap water now, in one breath.

'Shall we go?' asked Jamuna. Chaya nodded in assent, her face still sorrowful.

As the two of them stood at the threshold of the room, ready to lock it, Chaya's eyes fell on Bhaskar Rao's handkerchief, still spread out on the chair. Once again filled with fury she returned to the room. She lifted up the handkerchief with the tip of her umbrella and flung it out through the window. When she came back to Jamuna who waited for her at the door, she said, 'Akka', but the rising sobs stopped her from saying anything more.

'There is no end to this, Chaya. We could hold on to each other and sob our hearts out all day. But must we do that? You stand in front of me; I stand in front of you. Isn't that enough?'

'Amma,' said Chaya, weeping in great spasms now.

'Very well, come inside then. We won't go anywhere,' Jamuna said.

Chaya wiped her eyes and blew her nose. 'No, let's go. I'll behave properly from now on.'

'My dear, when did you not behave properly,' said Jamuna, giving Chaya a hug. But quickly freeing herself, and not allowing that moment to extend itself, she closed the doors and locked them.

When they looked out at the street from the bottom of the stairs, it looked normal enough. The trench that had been dug alongside the street in order to change the water pipes was still full of mud. As usual Jamuna and Chaya had to cross the muddy ditch in front of the house and step into the street with care.

'Look there,' pointed Jamuna.

Bhaskar Rao had not left the street yet. His car had been pushed little by little right to the end of the street. But now there were no children about to push it any further. Bhaskar Rao himself was standing outside the car along with a couple of workmen.

Chaya narrowed her eyes to look. Then she said, 'It doesn't look as if they are pushing, does it?'

'I think they are trying to lift it,' said Jamuna.

'Yes, I can see it clearly, now that you say so. Both the left wheels have sunk into the mud.'

Chaya took Jamuna's hand and held it tight.

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